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A Journal of Politics and the Arts

VOLUME 241 WASHINGTON, MARCH 25, 2010 NUMBER 4,879

Muscle Bound

One of the oddities of the health care reform saga is that, amid a debate that raises profound questions about a citizen's right to medical attention and the appropriate structuring of an entire industry, public discussion has come to focus on an issue that is both picayune and utterly phony: the legitimacy of Democrats using budget reconciliation to pass a final bill.

Reconciliation is a congressional procedure used to expedite votes on budgetary matters. Its main attraction is that it allows a bill to be passed with a majority vote in the Senate. As the filibuster has evolved from a rarely used signal of unusually strong dissent into a routine requirement for a supermajority, reconciliation has become a vital legislative tool, embraced by both parties. And it has come into play now because Democrats need it to make health care reform palatable to both chambers of Congress. Their plan is to have the House pass the Senate bill, and then to have both the House and Senate amend the bill through reconciliation. The amendments, Democrats agree, would be limited to questions of tax and spending levels—the very sorts of issues for which reconciliation was designed.

In response, Republicans have exploded in indignation, and their complaints have found a sympathetic hearing in the Washington media. Here are a few select samples of the coverage—all from straight-news reporters: "Democrats have not ruled out the possibility of using a strong-arm tactic, called 'budget reconciliation,'" (Associated Press); "Obama may be ready to play hardball and lean on filibuster-busting reconciliation rules" (*Roll Call*); "the hardball strategy would worsen partisan friction" (*Congressional Quarterly*). *The New York Times*, as if seized by a tic, has used the term "muscle" on at least three occasions to describe reconciliation.

This hackishness was most recently on display in a thunderous *Washington Post* op-ed by Senator Orrin Hatch. Lamenting the haste of simple majority votes, the great elder statesman railed that "the Constitution intends the opposite process," a claim that is utterly ahistorical—the Constitution makes no mention of the filibuster. Indeed, the Constitution prescribes a supermajority vote for a mere handful of select purposes, ordinary legislation not among them.

The heart of Hatch's argument boils down to one sentence: "This use of reconciliation to jam through this legislation, against the will of the American people, would be unprecedented in scope." There are two relevant statements of fact here, each of which has been repeated ad nauseam: (1) Reconciliation has never previously been used for major policy changes; (2) The Democrats are attempting to use reconciliation to pass a major health care bill. Both of these statements are incorrect.

First, both parties have frequently used budget reconciliation to enact major policy changes. President Reagan used reconciliation to pass a collection of tax and budgetary changes that constituted the heart of the Reagan Revolution, which conservatives to this day celebrate as a seminal inflection point in American history. It has been employed for such sundry purposes as welfare reform, drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), and most major health care reforms of the last three decades.

Second, and more important, Democrats are not using reconciliation to pass health care reform. They are planning to pass health care reform through regular legislative channels—first having overcome a filibuster in the Senate, and then passing an identical bill through the House of Representatives. *That* bill represents sweeping changes to health care policy. The reconciliation bill that will accompany that legislation consists of small changes to budgetary matters pertaining to health care reform. The changes it imposes would be far smaller than those brought about by many reconciliation bills.

What's so strange is that, not only has reconciliation been used for far more sweeping purposes than those contemplated by Democrats today, it has done so with hardly any controversy. In 2005, a handful of Democratic senators objected to using reconciliation to open ANWR for drilling. Republican Judd Gregg, his voice dripping with sarcasm, took to the Senate floor to reply, "The representation by the senator from Massachusetts, that somehow this is outside the rules to proceed within the rules, is a very unique view of the rules." It was a persuasive case. Gregg, naturally, is now screaming bloody murder about reconciliation.

The health care debate, with opponents crying socialism about reform that is patterned after classic moderate Republicanism, has exposed the small-mindedness of the GOP. The party's reconciliation hysteria may not be its worst moment of this episode, but it is its most pathetic. That opponents have had to lean so heavily on a completely trumped-up objection speaks volumes about the overall strength of their case. ◆

ROBERT NEUBECKER

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Sink or Swim

The GOP's Dickensian fix for health care.

JONATHAN CHAIT

TRB
From Washington

When you consider the differences between Democrats and Republicans on health care, you probably think in terms of scale. Democrats want to enact a big reform, while Republicans favor incremental progress. House Minority Whip Eric Cantor coos, "We want to take a much more commonsense, modest, incremental approach, trying to address the first issue first, which is cost, and then go on to try to deal with some of the things that the president and Speaker Pelosi want to do." Within a recent six-month span, Republicans on the Senate floor used the phrase "step-by-step" to describe their approach to health care an astonishing 173 times.

The reality is quite different. What separates the two parties is not how far to go, but in which direction to go. The divide is simple. Democrats propose to shift resources from the rich and the healthy to the poor and the sick. Republicans want to do just the opposite. Republican health care plans reflect the party's increasingly widespread belief that good health, like other forms of prosperity, is a matter of personal responsibility. Democratic plans to help the sick at the expense of the healthy therefore amount to socialism.

Health insurance, if you think about it, is a redistribution scheme. It transfers money from the winners (people who don't need much medical care) to the losers (people who do). It differs from other redistribution schemes because, unlike programs that redistribute from rich to poor, the winners and losers can't be sure in advance which category they'll be in. That's why people enter into it voluntarily—today I might be healthy, tomorrow I may contract some horrible disease.

The problem with this system is that, while you can't be certain who will win and who will lose in the medical lottery of life, you can make some educated guesses. The health insurance industry is good at making those guesses, and getting better all the time. The business of insurance is to keep expensive customers out and cheap customers in.

Left to their own devices, millions of Americans could not afford to buy health insurance, because their expected medical costs are too high—they're the losers of the medical lottery—or their incomes are too low. Obviously, many Americans *are* left to their own devices, with horrifying results. But many more are not, because they're lucky enough to get insurance through their job. In an office insurance pool, everybody pays the same rate, meaning the healthy subsidize the sick.

The Democrats' health care plan aims to create pools for people outside of the employer market, joining healthier individuals together with the sick, so that the former effectively subsidize the latter. The common element of all the Republican plans is to do the opposite—to separate the healthy from the sick.

Republicans have long championed Health Savings Accounts, which give individuals who buy insurance a tax deduction for money they set aside for a high-deductible plan. Since tax deductions are worth more to people in higher tax brackets, and since high-deductible plans appeal more to those with lower medical expenses, the plans attract the rich and healthy, leaving the poor and sick behind.

The thrust of the GOP ideas currently on offer is to reduce health insurance regulation. Republicans would create financial incentives that, according to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), would encourage states to cut regulation; they would also let businesses and individuals buy insurance from other states. (Health insurance is regulated by state governments.) As a result, health insurance regulation would sink to the level of whichever state offered the laxest regulations. If it worked like the credit card industry, governors would be competing to undercut each other's regulations in order to lure insurers to their states.

Some state regulations are meant to protect all consumers, by requiring licensing of doctors, a fair appeals process for claims, and so on. But many are specifically aimed at helping sick people. Some regulations require that certain procedures must be covered—cancer screenings, diabetes treatment, and so on. Others limit the degree to which insurers can charge higher rates to small businesses or individuals that have higher health risks. Reducing these regulations would reduce costs for the healthy, but raise them for the sick. The GOP's solution for those with preexisting conditions is to shunt them into state high-risk pools, which (as my colleague Jonathan Cohn has explained) work very poorly and which the Republicans would deny adequate funds.

Republicans boast that the CBO says their plan would reduce insurance premiums. This is true. The CBO predicted this would happen because the GOP plan would reduce premiums for healthy people, bringing more of them into the insurance pool, and raise premiums for sicker people, driving more of them out.

Why would Republicans favor a result like this? The better question might be, why wouldn't they? The modern Republican domestic agenda is, above all, an attack on redistribution, a crusade to free society's winners from shouldering the burdens of its losers.

The core of this philosophical divide was on display in last week's health care summit. Senator Tom Harkin, a traditional liberal, denounced policies that "allow segregation in America on the basis of your health." Harkin's point was that the only way to protect the sick is to pool them with the healthy. Conservatives seized upon Harkin's remark. "Having people pay their own way," mocked an incredulous Jeffrey Anderson, a former health care speechwriter in the Bush administration, "is apparently an injustice akin to segregating them by race or creed."

"Pay their own way"—that gets to the heart of the party's new vision of health as a consequence of personal morality. "I think a national health care act substitutes for a lack of personal responsibility," complained Republican Representative Steve King last August. Newt Gingrich gloats that Americans have moved "away from the idea of government-run health care and toward more personal responsibility."

Liberals have reacted with astonishment to conservative accusations of socialism against Obama, whose plan relies mostly on private insurance and closely resembles proposals put forward by Senate Republicans in 1993 and Mitt Romney in 2005. It is, however, socialistic in the broad sense of spreading the risk of medical misfortune. This is a goal that Republicans increasingly abhor. ◆

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Cover portrait by Mark Ulriksen

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THE NEW REPUBLIC (ISSN 0028-6583), Vol. 241, Number 4, Issue 4,879, March 25, 2010. (Printed in the United States on March 3, 2010.) Published bi-weekly (except for skipped publication dates of January 21, March 4, April 22, August 5, August 26, September 16, October 7, November 25, December 16 & 23, 2010) at 1331 H Street, NW, Suite 700, Washington, D.C. 20005. Telephone (202) 508-4444. Yearly subscriptions, $79.97; foreign, $119.97 (U.S. funds); Canada, $99.97 (U.S. funds). Back issues, $8.00 domestic and $10.00 foreign/Canada (includes postage & handling).

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Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing offices. Rights and permissions: fax (202) 204-4871. Indexed in Readers' Guide, Media Review Digest. For hard copy reprints, call (202) 508-4444. Microform, Canadian Periodical Index, and CD-ROM are available through ProQuest, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Telephone (800) 521-0600. Postmaster: Send changes of address to The New Republic, P.O. Box 15818, North Hollywood, CA 91615-5818. Member, BPA Worldwide. Send letters and unsolicited manuscripts to letters@tnr.com. Poetry submissions must be e-mailed to poetry@tnr.com.

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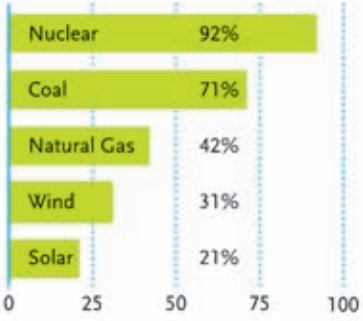

Sources: Ventyx / U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2008

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Man of Letters

Captain Whitten was my student.

"You find yourself unable to compute that the last message you sent will go unanswered."

BAZ RATNER/REUTERS/LANDOV

THIS IS THE WAY it happens. They sit in your class poring over Dante's *Inferno* or grousing good-naturedly about the silent film you've insisted they admire. They graduate to crawling through the mud at Ranger School or learning how to fly a Chinook in Alabama. They write to let you know about the milestones and about the weirdness; they ask what's new on your end and tell you not to work "too hard." They stop by the office whenever they're back in town for a classmate's wedding or some other event. They become, for reasons you think you understand, more active correspondents the farther away they find themselves. Messages—sometimes old-fashioned letters—roll in from Mosul or Herat, from places you can't even locate on a map but the names of which give you a sense of the general atmosphere: "COP Crazy," "FOB Warhorse."

You do your best to respond to the mood they set, and you somehow grow closer at an impossible distance in what you imagine must be a distinctly wartime way. It isn't the complicated intimacy of a family member or a comrade-in-arms. Nor is it the fleeting, illusory intimacy contrived by strangers on a plane. It survives its long silences and permits—on both sides—frankness and a lack of self-consciousness about exhilaration or despair. It is free of an impulse to censor or a need to protect the recipient. It is occasionally urgent, often wry, and (whatever the register) always authentic. Perhaps it is best described as the intimacy of having known how another's mind works and of having watched it grow in response to unprecedented stimuli and responsibilities, to the confusion that attends even the most carefully orchestrated operation, to the challenges of improvisation.

In such correspondence, one finds, to paraphrase Wordsworth, the epic growth of the soldier's mind when it is engaged in an unusual enterprise: teaching an Afghan unit to fire old Soviet artillery with a manual written in Russian, serving in the military police at a detention facility in the wake of Abu Ghraib, or leading a company of paratroopers on missions through Zabul Province.

Then one day, maybe, even though you have known from the start that this is one of the possible endings to the story, you find yourself unable to compute the fact that the last message you sent will go unanswered. Several days later you sit in a pew staring at a flag-draped coffin that holds the remains of a man not yet 30. A coffin surrounded by a wife and a mother and a father and a sister, who also wears the uniform, and by a lot of other young men who aren't yet 30. Men who call him—repeatedly and forcefully—their best friend. Men permitted to grieve unabashedly in this place as they struggle through their eulogies but who suffer invisibly terrible things elsewhere.

And you understand that distance is no insulation, that Zabul Province is unendurably close. You realize that your ritual of scanning the casualty notices on the DOD website and *The Washington Post*'s "Faces of the Fallen" hasn't really conditioned you at all.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE News Release No. 093-10, posted on February 3, 2010, announced that two soldiers, Captain Daniel P. Whitten, 28, of Grimes, Iowa, and Private First Class Zachary G. Lovejoy, 20, of Albuquerque, New Mexico, "died of wounds suffered when enemy forces attacked their vehicle with an improvised explosive device Feb. 2 in Zabul province, Afghanistan. They were assigned to the 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, N.C." Capt. Whitten commanded C Company; Pfc. Lovejoy was one of his paratroopers.

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Dan Whitten graduated from West Point in 2004. He was my student. Together, we read everything from Montaigne to *The Maltese Falcon*; we studied *His Girl Friday*, *Citizen Kane*, *Grand Illusion*, and *Night and Fog*. He was a kind of student I always hope to find in class: someone who keeps the rest of us honest. He was direct, impatient with muddled thinking, yet he delivered his arguments with such wit and humor and from a place of such scrupulousness that no one could justly resent a correction. He wrote a thesis with one of my colleagues on beauty and elegance in scientific theory, but he could be equally engaging on the subject of *Braveheart* (a film about which we disagreed) or *Billy Madison* (about which we were in absolute accord). And he made me laugh, which is something I note fewer and fewer people are able to do. He was buried Friday, February 12, 2010, in the West Point cemetery.

In the years since his graduation, Dan had become a correspondent—someone whose messages I welcomed, whose insights I valued. When I asked what he needed, he would say he needed nothing: "No specific needs or desires right now, but I'll let you know if I lose/break anything." When I asked him how he was, he would say, "[L]ife is good. Except the whole Afghanistan thing."

In one of those strange coincidences that make the Army seem small, another former student was one of Dan's lieutenants in Afghanistan. After Dan died, the lieutenant told me he came to understand more about leadership in a few months with Capt. Whitten than at any passage in his life. Dan had shared with me his observations on the lieutenant's progress, and I could see the care he took with him. The specificity and humanity of his observations suggested the kind of attention he paid all the paratroopers he commanded. From past experience, I knew, too, the equanimity with which Dan greeted setbacks, as well as successes. That quality must have helped prepare his men for even this eventuality.

Dan balanced what all thoughtful officers must learn how to balance: in his words, "day to day business and improving the lives of [his] paratroopers" on the one hand, and on the other hand reflecting, in moments that allowed, "on the purpose, conduct, and endstate of this conflict." In his last e-mail to me, he wrote of becoming "a little more restless," as a man with an active, conscientious mind is apt to become when he finds himself in a foreign, hostile place—in what a Marine lieutenant I once met at Walter Reed called, while staring at what was left of his leg, "a sea of variability," and tries to keep everyone else afloat and swimming.

Many soldiers, from Alexander the Great to Babur, the sixteenth-century Mughal emperor; from the British general Frederick Sleigh Roberts to those Soviet artillerymen who left their guns behind, have gone to war in the punishing terrain of Afghanistan. I returned recently to Babur's memoir, the *Baburnama*, which I have read with cadets. Idiosyncratic and capable of great cruelty, Babur was also a keen observer of the landscape, customs, and peoples of Afghanistan, including the region in which Dan served. Babur had a remarkable capacity for endurance as well. Toward the end of 1506, he began a winter trek from Herat to Kabul. Following the advice of one of his counselors to take the northern route, Babur at one point found the snowy roads virtually impassable: "During those few days we endured much hardship and misery, more than I had experienced in my whole life," he reports, here in Wheeler M. Thackston's translation. Babur commemorated the journey in verse: "Is there any cruelty or misery the spheres can inflict I have not suffered?/Is there any pain or torment my wounded heart has not suffered?"

Stopping for a night at a cave too small to accommodate all his men, Babur found a shovel and dug himself a shelter by the mouth of the cave: "I dug down chest deep, and still I did not reach the ground, but it was a bit of shelter from the wind. There I sat down. Several people asked me to come inside, but I refused. I figured that to leave my people out in the snow and the storm, with me comfortable in a warm place, or to abandon all the people to hardship and misery, with me here asleep without a care, was neither manly nor comradely. Whatever hardship and difficulty there was, I would suffer it too." And there Babur remained, "all huddled up" with frostbitten ears, until further inspection revealed that the cave was larger than it seemed. There, too, Dan would have remained; he just wouldn't have felt the need to tell you about it afterward.

In his West Point yearbook entry, where most cadets include a paragraph, customarily penned by their friends, full of inside jokes, struggles, or triumphs, Dan offered only one cryptic line: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." It comes, of course, from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*—from the poem's first section, "The Burial of the Dead." Dan was there before us.

Elizabeth D. Samet

Elizabeth D. Samet is a professor of English at the U.S. Military Academy and the author of Soldier's Heart: Reading Literature Through Peace and War at West Point. The opinions she expresses here are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

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Our Man in Kabul?

The sadistic Afghan warlord who wants to be our friend.

"Let's talk about why you plan to kill me." It was March 1987, and Milt Bearden was sitting in a spare interview room at the Islamabad headquarters of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. Bearden was then the CIA's station chief in Islamabad, serving as the link between Washington and the U.S.-funded Afghan rebels bleeding the Soviets in Afghanistan. He had come to see the mujahedin's most lethal warlord, a radical Islamist named Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. No other Afghan leader had received more money from the United States than Hekmatyar, yet he showed his Western patrons precious little gratitude. He claimed to despise the United States as much as the Soviet Union, and, while visiting the United Nations two years earlier, he had refused an invitation to meet Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office. Now Bearden was hearing grumbling from Washington about why the United States was financing an anti-American zealot known for splashing acid in the faces of unveiled women. He decided it was time to confront a man he considered "the darkest" of the Afghan warlords. And Hekmatyar was convinced he'd come to snuff him.

Hekmatyar, then about 40, fingered a strand of agate prayer beads. He had been summoned by the ISI, which served as the conduit for U.S. aid to the Afghan rebels. He has a long thin face, dark eyes, and a long beard, and is typically clad in a black turban and robes. His appearance has been described as feline, but the façade is misleading. As Bearden would later recall in his memoir, *The Main Enemy*, Hekmatyar "thought nothing of ordering an execution for a slight breach of party discipline." On

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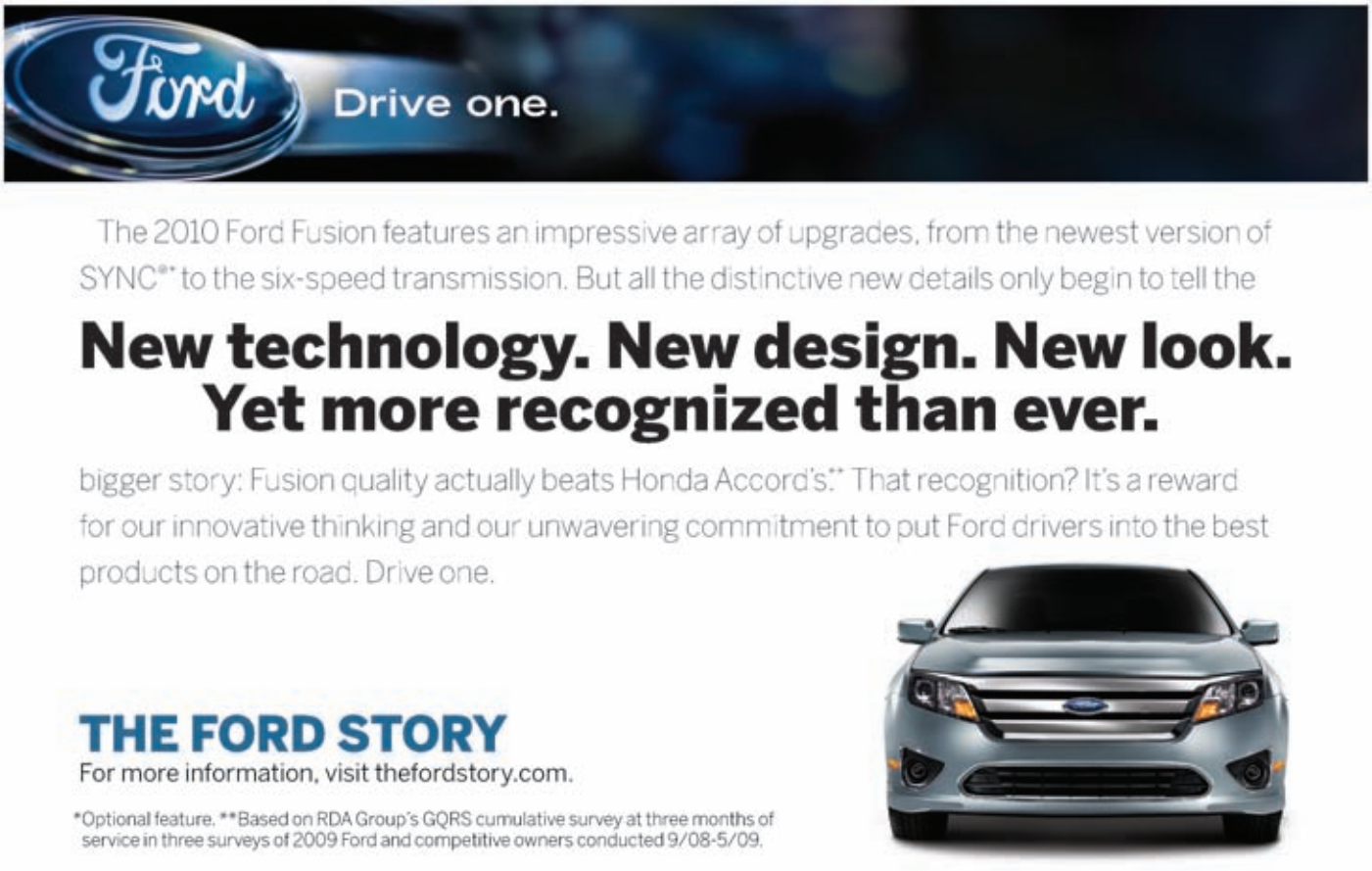
this day, he was sullen, and the two men squabbled about Hekmatyar's reputation for brutality, which the warlord alternately denied and dismissed as unimportant. Then Hekmatyar cut to the chase: "I know what you're planning to do," he said. "You're armed. I can see that." Bearden opened his jacket to show that he wasn't carrying a gun. (Although he was—in the small of his back.) He asked Hekmatyar why the CIA would want to eliminate its most valuable anti-Soviet fighter. Because, Hekmatyar replied, the United States understood that the Soviets were already done for. Hekmatyar had now defeated one superpower, and the Americans feared what he might do to them. Addressing Hekmatyar by the title he had acquired from Kabul University, Bearden said: "I think the engineer flatters himself."

Only prematurely. Fifteen years later, in May 2002, a CIA-operated aerial drone circling near Kabul shot a Hellfire anti-tank missile at a convoy on the ground. The explosion killed several men, but failed to claim its target: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. By then, the Afghan warlord was on Washington's most-wanted list as a leader of the post-2001 Afghan insurgency. But, eight years later, circumstances have changed once again. The United States is now considering whether it's time to stop trying to kill Hekmatyar and start negotiating with him—a choice that could have crucial implications for Barack Obama's war in Afghanistan.

The United States is not fighting one enemy in Afghanistan. While the media often equate "insurgency" with "Taliban," there are, in fact, three major insurgent groups. The biggest is the Quetta Shura Taliban. Led by the famous one-eyed cleric Mullah Omar, this group is based in the Pakistani city of Quetta and fights mainly in the southern Helmand and Kandahar provinces. Another is the Haqqani network, run by the father-and-son team of Jalaluddin and Sirajuddin Haqqani from Pakistan's northwestern tribal areas. The Haqqanis and their Al Qaeda allies sow chaos in Afghanistan's east and were likely behind the double-agent suicide bomb at a CIA base near Khost this winter.

Then there is Hekmatyar. His beard now half gray, he is again tormenting foreign infidels. His Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin—which translates roughly as "Gulbuddin's Islamic Party," shorthanded as HIG by the U.S. military—may be the smallest of the three insurgent wings, but it is "no less lethal" than the others, as the American commander in Afghanistan, Stanley McChrystal, recently put it. That was clear last October 3, when over 150 insurgents overwhelmed a remote outpost in Nuristan Province, killing eight American soldiers and wounding 24. Hekmatyar is believed to have aided and perhaps organized the attack—just the latest ominous sign of what one senior U.S. military official in Kabul calls his increasing activity in the provinces north and east of Kabul. But, while Hekmatyar shares his fellow insurgents' rhetoric about defeating the Americans, he is not as doctrinaire. A lifelong dealmaker, he cares most about one thing: power. "He wants to ensure he has a role in the government," says the military official.

A thirst for power has driven Hekmatyar for more than 30 years. Indeed, he once nearly ruled Afghanistan. Born to a Pashtun family, he attended a military high school and then Kabul University's prestigious College of Engineering. But he gave up his studies to join Kabul's Islamic youth movement, which vehemently opposed the Soviet-backed communists then taking over Afghanistan's government. In 1972, Hekmatyar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murdered a Maoist student, an act that landed him in prison for two years. After his release, he sought refuge in Pakistan, where he founded Hezb-e-Islami in 1975 and developed ties with the ISI. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, Pakistan was in a high Islamist phase and felt deeply threatened by the godless communists on its border. Hekmatyar became the ISI's chief proxy warrior against the Soviets—with the help of what would eventually be some $600 million in U.S. aid.

He proved a brutally effective warrior. "To the Soviets," writes George Crile in *Charlie Wilson's War*, "he was the bogeyman behind the most unspeakable torture of their captured soldiers. Invariably his name was invoked with new arrivals to keep them from wandering off base unaccompanied, lest they fall into the hands of this depraved fanatic whose specialty, they claimed, was skinning infidels alive." More effective than such terror, however, was his men's use of U.S. Stinger missiles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers to destroy countless Soviet tanks and helicopters.

After the Soviets completed their withdrawal in 1989, Hekmatyar expected to rule the country. But so did other mujahedin leaders, and vicious fighting ensued. From 1992 to 1994, the Afghan capital became a battleground as Hekmatyar, still in possession of a U.S.-supplied arsenal, wantonly shelled the city. "He was sitting in the suburbs of Kabul, and he was sending rockets, regardless of where they would land. Thousands of Afghans died," says Ali Jalali, who served as Afghanistan's interior minister from 2003 to 2005. (In a strange historical footnote, one rocket struck a compound where Hamid Karzai was being held captive by political rivals, allowing him to escape and then flee the country.) "We have already had one and a half million martyrs," Hekmatyar remorselessly explained in 1992. "We are ready to offer as many to establish a true Islamic republic." But the Afghan people disagreed. Hekmatyar's brutality marginalized him, and he was no match for the anti-warlord Taliban movement. Unable to hold his ground militarily when the Taliban stormed Kabul in 1996, Hekmatyar fled to Iran.

He was far from finished. After the United States ousted the Taliban in 2001, Hekmatyar was not invited to join the Karzai government, and he resentfully called for a new jihad. Iran expelled him soon after, and he quickly rejoined the fight. Hekmatyar linked up with Al Qaeda—he claims to have helped Osama bin Laden escape from Tora Bora—and, in 2002, took credit for an attempt to kill Karzai. He also likely renewed his ties with the ISI, which, at minimum, has allowed HIG unhindered use of the Shamshatoo refugee camp southeast of Peshawar as a logistics and recruiting hub.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar switches his alliances with ghoulish glee.

DIMITRI KOCHKO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Though his profile has waxed and waned during the war, Hekmatyar has recently re-emerged with a vengeance. He takes credit for a 2008 attack on a military parade that nearly killed Karzai and is also thought to be responsible for an August 2008 ambush near Kabul that left ten French soldiers dead and some of the bodies reportedly mutilated. And then, there was the vicious attack in Nuristan. Most ominously, perhaps, Hekmatyar has found common ground with his old Taliban rivals. As the Afghanistan-based academic Sippi Moghaddam writes in the compilation *Decoding the New Taliban*, the employment of Hekmatyar's network "is of tremendous advantage to the Taliban in their activities in the northeast."

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Obama administration officials don't expect to crush the Afghan insurgency militarily. The current U.S. surge aims to turn the momentum of the war and then attempt a political "reconciliation" with elements of the insurgency. The effort will be aimed primarily at low-level combatants and local leaders who fight more for money and parochial reasons than for grand ideology. Senior insurgent leaders, like the Haqqanis and top Quetta Shura Taliban members, are probably just too fanatical to deal with. But Hekmatyar is another story. During the Afghan civil war, he was notorious for casually shifting allegiances, even if it meant allying with blood rivals. "This is a man who has switched sides his whole life," says the Brookings Institution's Bruce Riedel, who led the Obama administration's first Afghanistan review.

Hekmatyar has flirted with peace talks for years, but it's clear that both sides have a keener interest than before. "It's gotten considerably more serious than it was even a year ago," says Candace Rondeaux, a Kabul-based analyst for The International Crisis Group. Even though the State Department has officially designates Hekmatyar a wanted terrorist, last April, a Hekmatyar emissary met with an aide to Richard Holbrooke, Obama's point man for Afghanistan and Pakistan. In January, Hekmatyar's son attended unofficial reconciliation talks in the Maldives with a group of Afghan legislators.

A deal with Hekmatyar could give Obama's prospects in Afghanistan a huge boost. Even now, American troops are hard-pressed to pacify southern Afghanistan, and the United States can ill afford to see the north slip any further into chaos. Disarming Hekmatyar's fighters, sometimes estimated to number in the thousands, would be a major strategic boost. And, if a hardened anti-American warlord like Hekmatyar were to renounce violence, that could set an example for his Pashtun admirers throughout the region.

What does he want? Hekmatyar insists that foreign troops must leave Afghanistan within 18 months. But he may be flexible if it means getting a taste of power. It helps that Hekmatyar already has a toe in politics: HIG's nonviolent political arm—which claims not to take cues from Hekmatyar, though few believe it—already holds 19 of 246 seats in the Afghan parliament, and the country's economic minister is a member. Hekmatyar recently asserted that 70 percent of Afghans support his party. That's doubtful; but the claim was a sign that the warlord may still cling to his dream of ruling Afghanistan. (A case in point: Last year, a reputed plan that would have granted Hekmatyar's party more control of the government but exiled him to Saudi Arabia for three years went nowhere.) It also helps that, after 30 years of fighting, Hekmatyar may simply be tiring of jihad. "I have dedicated my whole life to struggle," he wrote in a spring 2008 letter to Karzai offering to talk, "but I am old."

Still, cutting a deal with Hekmatyar that grants him legitimized power could amount to a horrendous moral compromise. The Afghan people remember well the blood on Hekmatyar's hands. "In the urban part of the civil society, it will be like a bomb that will destroy the image of the government," says Riccardo Redaelli, an Italian academic who studies Afghan politics. Nor is empowering a man who advocates strict Islamic law likely to play well in the United States. "Hekmatyar is a pretty difficult character to sell to the American people," says Riedel.

But these are desperate times. Hamid Karzai is embattled, paranoid, and desperate to shore up his political base. Barack Obama, meanwhile, seems less interested in the political composition of Afghanistan than in reducing violence to a level that will allow for a U.S. withdrawal. "At the end of the day, we'll take what we can get," says Riedel. The engineer was right to flatter himself.

Michael Crowley

Labor and Delivery

An obscure nominee and a hinge moment for the Obama presidency.

In a few weeks, Barack Obama will have a chance to do something he hasn't done particularly well during his first year in office: successfully defy his opponents and, at the same time, reassure his most loyal supporters. At issue is the fate of Craig Becker, one of Obama's nominees for the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Last month, Becker was denied a vote on his nomination when Senate Democrats failed to overcome a GOP filibuster. Now, the Senate's coming Easter break will give Obama an opportunity to put Becker on the NLRB via recess appointment. And there are good reasons—among them, the need to restore some semblance of functioning government in Washington—why he shouldn't pass it up.

Created in 1935, the NLRB was a cornerstone of the Second New Deal. The board was designed to protect the right of workers to form unions—by preventing companies from intimidating organizers and employees, as well as by overseeing workplace votes on unionization. In carrying out this mandate, the NLRB laid the basis for a new American pluralism in which the growing power of business could be countered by that of organized workers. The board functioned reasonably well for its first 44 years, but, toward the end of the Carter administration, with Republican conservatives on the rise, it became a political battleground. In 1980, Republicans filibustered Carter's nominee to be general counsel of the NLRB. It was the first-ever use of the filibuster to block a nomination to the executive branch, and it was not on grounds of competence: Conservatives charged that the nominee, William Lubbers, an innocuous civil servant who had spent 27 years in the Labor Department, would favor unions over business.

Republicans, of course, were not acting simply on their own, but as allies of businesses that wanted to undermine the NLRB. In the mid-'70s, partly in

Will Obama fight for his NLRB nominee?

Stephen Savage

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response to competitive threats from abroad, many U.S. businesses had begun doing whatever they could—from firing organizers to threatening to move overseas—to prevent union organization. These tactics were often illegal, which was why big business was so eager to prevent the NLRB from doing its job.

Democrats finally beat the filibuster of Lubbers in May 1980, and, during Reagan's presidency, the parties worked out an informal arrangement for nominating members to the NLRB's five-person board. The party in the White House would enjoy only a simple majority, with two spots reserved for members of the other party (and, generally, the other side of the labor-management divide).

Obama has followed this pattern. Last spring, the White House reached an agreement with the Democratic chairman (Ted Kennedy) and ranking Republican (Mike Enzi) of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) committee to nominate two Democrats, Becker and Mark Pearce, and one Republican, Brian Hayes. Becker was a highly regarded professor at the University of Chicago Law School, as well as a counsel for the SEIU and AFL-CIO. Pearce is a Buffalo labor lawyer. And Hayes was a management lawyer for 25 years who also served as the Republican labor policy director on the HELP committee.

When the nominations came before the committee last October, Enzi and Alaska Republican Lisa Murkowski joined Democrats to send the slate to the Senate floor by a vote of 15-8. That should have been the end of it, but John McCain—who is facing a tough primary battle this year against a far-right conservative and has been eager to burnish his conservative credentials—decided to put a hold on the nomination. With the Senate needing 60 votes to break McCain's hold and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid failing to play tough on Becker's behalf, the nomination died when Congress recessed at Christmas. Then, when it returned in January, Obama, to his credit, renominated Becker and reached an agreement with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell to remove the hold on his nomination.

What happened next says a lot about the sorry state of politics in Washington. At the insistence of Republicans on the committee and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which has made defeating Becker a top priority, HELP held another hearing on the nomination. Republicans submitted a list of over 400 questions for Becker to answer—more than had been asked of Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor. In his responses, Becker dealt satisfactorily with the principal charge against him—that he would use the NLRB to administratively enact the Employee Free Choice Act. (The measure, which labor has been unable to get through Congress, would make it easier for unions to organize workplaces.) Becker said explicitly that he would not.

Yet this time, when the committee voted, Enzi and Murkowski both opposed him, and both backed a subsequent filibuster against him. Enzi lamely explained his vote, citing, among other things, Becker's willingness to require employers to provide unions that win the right to hold elections with contact information for employees—a requirement that the board has previously upheld. The motion on cloture, which took place during a snowstorm that kept members out of Washington, still got 52 votes compared to only 33 in favor of maintaining the filibuster; but it was not enough for Becker's nomination to proceed to the floor.

The defeat of Becker meant the defeat of Obama's other NLRB nominees as well, since they were put forward as a package. And that leaves the NLRB in shambles. For over two years, only two members have been sitting on the board—Democrat Wilma Liebman and Republican Peter Schaumber. They have issued almost 600 decisions on matters on which they agreed but have put off any controversial decisions that might create or challenge precedents. Sixty cases have been sitting around for over two years. And even the decisions they have made may be in doubt. In scores of cases, the losing party has filed legal challenges to the board's authority, arguing that it did not have a quorum with which to make a decision. One case is now before the Supreme Court, and, if the court rules against the NLRB, dozens upon dozens of its recent rulings could be thrown out.

All of this is fine with conservatives, since a weakened NLRB is good news for employers and bad news for employees who are seeking to unionize their workplaces. By gumming up the NLRB's ability to function, Republicans are continuing the battle they launched three decades ago with the nomination of William Lubbers: They are impeding unions from providing a needed check on the power of business.

CAN ANYTHING BE DONE? Yes. Obama can issue recess appointments for Becker and the two other nominees. That means they could serve about a year and a half—until the end of the Senate's term—as George W. Bush's UN ambassador, John Bolton, did. If they are not confirmed at the end of that period, they can serve another two years, but without salary. Ronald Reagan made 243 recess appointments, Bill Clinton 140, and George W. Bush 171. In fact, Bush made seven recess appointments to the NLRB.

Obama's first chance to make such an appointment was the Presidents' Day recess from February 15 to 21. Both the AFL-CIO and the Communications Workers of America urged him to act. But nothing happened, and, when I contacted the White House to find out why, I got no response.

The administration has another chance to act during the Easter recess from March 29 to April 11. Jon Hiatt, chief of staff to AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, says his union has a "strong belief" that Obama will act then. But other labor officials, who didn't want to speak for attribution, are far less certain of the outcome. Obama's failure to make the recess appointment in February has only added to their unhappiness with the administration, which began when Obama endorsed an excise tax on the generous health insurance plans that unions have won for their members—after he had pledged during the campaign to oppose such a tax and attacked McCain for favoring one. Trumka has told several people the story of how, when he went to the White House to discuss the health care bill, the president told him that, if he was not willing to accept the excise tax, there could be no discussion. Says one person who has worked closely with the AFL-CIO and its unions, "People are starting to think it is not just Rahm Emanuel."

At the end of this month, Obama will have a chance to prove these critics wrong. It would certainly be the politically smart thing to do. Labor remains essential to the Democratic coalition, and, given that Obama cannot offer unions what they really want—the Employee Free Choice Act—he can at least mollify them with this. More than a shrewd political move, however, filling the vacancies on the NLRB is the right thing to do. It is a small agency but an important one. And, as long as it remains crippled, one of the core philosophical commitments of the Democratic Party—the idea that workers ought to have some counterweight to the overwhelming power of big business—goes unfulfilled.

JOHN B. JUDIS

ANTHONY RUSSO

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[1] Financial Times, July 19 2009, Title: How to End America's Deadly Coal Addiction by: Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

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Nuclear Standoff

What happens when you discover uranium in your backyard.

ANDREW RICE

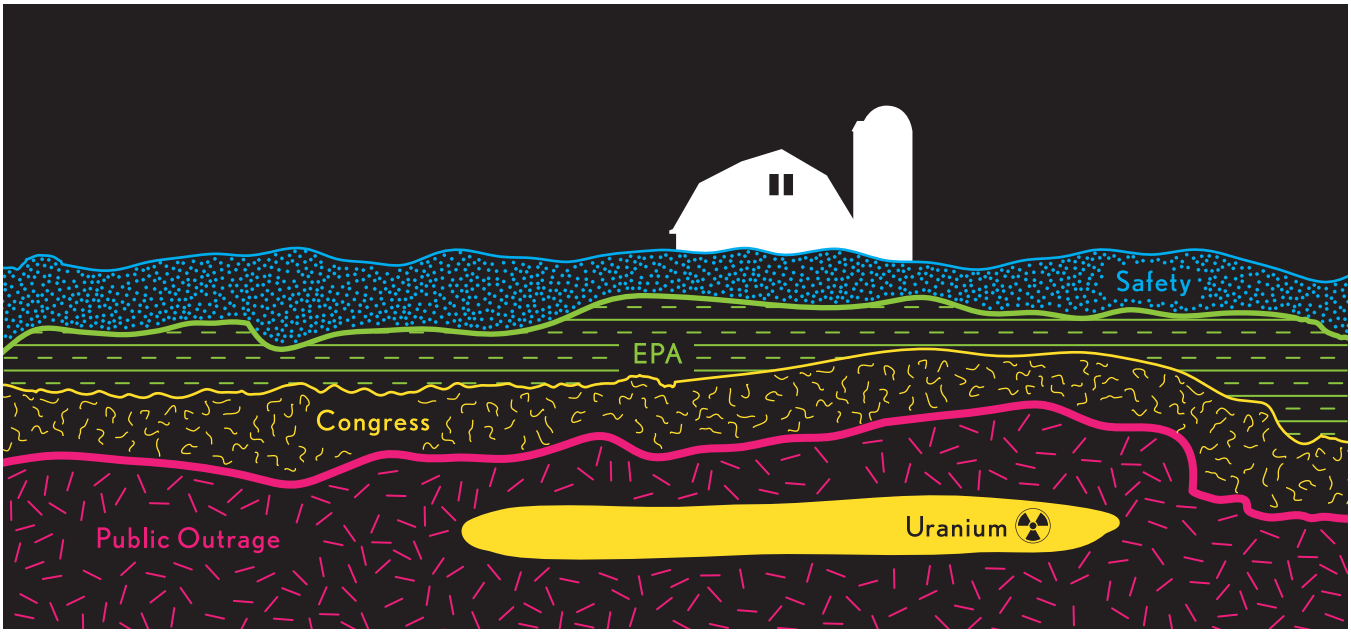
As is often the case with tales of great discovery, the details of how buried treasure came to be found beneath the rolling countryside of Pittsylvania County, Virginia, have grown a little gauzy over the last 30 years. But here is the story as the prospectors tell it. One day, in March 1979, a man named Byrd Berman, a geologist by training, was driving down a road through cattle pastures when the scintillometer sitting on the dashboard of his Hertz rental car began to beep. The device, similar to a Geiger counter, was designed to detect the gamma radiation naturally emitted by uranium. As he watched the needle on the scintillometer dance, Berman was certain he'd hit something huge, fissile, and extraordinarily valuable.

Uranium, as everyone knows, is used to make the fuel for nuclear reactors, and, at the time, it was in huge demand. Nuclear power was considered to be the energy source of the future, and America was in the midst of building or planning hundreds of plants. All of them needed uranium. Berman was working for a company called Marline Uranium and a boss named Al Swanson, who was himself something of a prospecting legend. Swanson had discovered a rich uranium strike in his home country of Canada, and he thought he saw some geological similarities to that deposit along America's eastern seaboard. Specifically, he was intrigued by a vast network of depressions known as the Triassic Basins, formations created around 200 million years ago by the tectonic processes that split North America from Africa, opening up the Atlantic Ocean. Swanson dispatched men to canvass the basins from North Carolina to New Jersey, but, for a long time, nothing panned out—until Byrd Berman happened to drive past the right farm.

Returning to the company's office, Berman knew he'd hit a memorable strike. "I came in and I said there was no question in my mind that we had fifty million pounds," Berman recalled recently. "I was kind of conservative." The next day, he returned to the same place with another Marline geologist, Henry Singletary. When they got to the right spot, the prospectors pulled over. "Him being senior man on the thing, it was me that had to get down in the muddy ditch and dig the sample," Singletary says. He took a hammer and knocked loose a few pieces of rock, which gave an off-the-charts reading for radioactivity. Later, the samples were found to contain four to five times as much uranium as is typically found in commercial mines. And it was right there at the surface, meaning the ore would be fairly simple to extract.

"I said, 'Well, here's the biggest find in a long time of uranium,'" Berman recalls. That night, he went back to his hotel room savoring his luck. "I turned on the television and what were they talking about? They were talking about a strange place called Three Mile Island." That very day, as Berman remembers it, there had been an accident at a nuclear plant in Pennsylvania. (The coincidental timing may sound like a tall tale, but Singletary's memory was similar: He thinks their discovery occurred the same week as Three Mile Island, though maybe not the same day.) While there were no deaths as a result of the partial meltdown, a significant amount of radioactive gas escaped into the atmosphere. The accident—combined with the release of a reac-

Coles Hill, a farm in southern Virginia, sits atop what is thought to be one of the world's ten richest uranium deposits.



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tor disaster movie, *The China Syndrome*, around the same time—would transform the way Americans regarded nuclear power. "So I was elated in the morning," Berman says, "and, by night, it fell apart."

What Berman and Singletary had found is today thought to be one of the ten richest uranium deposits in the world—containing up to 120 million pounds. But, while Marline did a lot of exploratory drilling in the area, the company never got to dig it up. Amid the anti-nuclear backlash that followed Three Mile Island, Virginians rose up in protest against Marline's mining plans. Actress Sissy Spacek, recently transplanted to a farm outside Charlottesville, visited the state capitol to tell starstruck legislators about alleged connections between uranium and cancer, and Governor Charles Robb signed a moratorium on mining uranium, which was meant to give the state government time to impose regulations. Instead, while a task force deliberated, market forces finished the work environmentalists had begun. U.S. utilities pulled the plug on roughly 100 planned nuclear plants, partly due to safety issues, but also because reactors already under construction were going way over budget. In 1984, the state uranium task force issued a qualified endorsement of mining, concluding it could be done with stringent safeguards. But Marline had run into financing problems and abandoned the project. The moratorium stayed in place. Meanwhile, the nuclear power industry went into a long period of somnolence, and nearly all of America's uranium mines closed down. Berman and Singletary's discovery was left in the ground—though it was never quite forgotten.

On a misty morning last year, Walter Coles and I drove out to the site of the deposit. A ruddy 71-year-old with a syrupy Old Virginia accent, Coles owns the land on which the uranium was found, and he retired there a few years ago. The 750-acre farm, known as Coles Hill, has been in his family since the 1790s. He keeps 200 head of cattle there, along with three Labrador retrievers. "Farmers care about their land, they love it, and they want to protect it and pass it on to their heirs," Coles said. He turned onto a gravel lane lined with ancient oaks, and we pulled up to his Georgian brick plantation house. Next to it was a small graveyard with the tombstones of a long line of Coles men: planters, members of Congress, officers of the Revolution and the Confederacy.

I was visiting Coles because, after decades out of the spotlight, uranium mining in general—and his family's deposit in particular—is once again in the news. Over the last few years, a new generation of policymakers has been revisiting the question of nuclear power. The scientific certainty of global warming now seems a far more immediate danger than the unlikely threat of radioactive disaster. Nuclear plants give off negligible amounts of greenhouse gases: an estimated 21 grams of carbon dioxide per kilowatt-hour, in contrast to as much as 700 grams for natural gas and 1,300 for coal. Fission looks like a practical compromise if you want to cut carbon emissions and accept that the world's not about to meet its energy needs through wind, geothermal, or solar power.

In 2005, Congress passed legislation that was meant to encourage the construction of new reactors through tax credits and $18.5 billion in loan guarantees. Recently, President Obama announced the first of those guarantees, for a plant in Georgia, which would be the first one commissioned in the United States since Three Mile Island. Of course, nuclear power still faces plenty of political hurdles, including skepticism from many on the left. Still, even some environmentalists, such as the venerable activist Stewart Brand, have offered endorsements, and Senator John Kerry—a longtime friend of the movement—cowrote an op-ed last fall with Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, arguing that nuclear power has to be a "core component" of any plan to reduce America's carbon emissions. Meanwhile, Europe and especially China are moving ahead much faster with nuclear expansion. The U.S. Energy Information Administration, a think tank within the Department of Energy, forecasts that the amount of electricity generated by nuclear plants will jump by almost 50 percent worldwide over the next two decades. And uranium production will have to increase significantly in order to keep up with demand.

The question is where all that uranium will come from. Currently, the United States gets the vast majority of its uranium from abroad, and the only mines in the country are west of the Mississippi. But geologists suspect that the Coles Hill deposit is not isolated. Scientists argue about the origins of the ore, but it's most likely a remnant of the same ancient tectonic processes that created the Triassic Basins—meaning that there could be similar deposits up and down the East Coast. Robert Bodnar, a geochemistry professor at Virginia Tech, has spent the last two years studying how the uranium got to Coles Hill. "I think there's a very high probability that there are other deposits of the same size, same grade, as Coles Hill located in the eastern United States," he told me. If he is right, if what's underneath Coles Hill isn't just some geologic anomaly, but rather the tip of a much larger potential source of energy and wealth, then it means that many East Coast communities could soon be in for the same sort of political donnybrook that has been unfolding in Pittsylvania County ever since 2007—the year Walter Coles decided it was time to try, once again, to do something with all that uranium.

Coles returned to the family farm in 2004, after serving several decades overseas with the U.S. Agency for International Development. He worked to win hearts and minds in Vietnam—where he'd earlier fought as a military pilot—and promoted privatization in Moscow following the fall of the Soviet Union. During his final stint abroad, in Afghanistan, some officials from Hamid Karzai's government came to seek Coles's advice. They said that a group of French investors had arrived in the country to search for uranium. That got Coles thinking. Uranium prices were starting to rise from a deep trough, spurred by increased demand for nuclear power and the impending expiration in 2013 of the Megatons to Megawatts program, under which the United States and Russia had agreed back in 1993 to turn old Soviet atomic-weapons stockpiles into commercial reactor fuel. The cost of a pound of uranium went from $20 in 2004, to $30 in 2005, to $40 at the beginning of 2006.

So it's not surprising that, when Coles retired to Virginia, mining companies were waiting for him. "They'd show up on the doorstep and say, 'Well, here's this farmer here, we can do a quick deal with him and get control of his ore body,'" Coles recalls. The world uranium market is dominated by a handful of multinational mining companies; Coles says every one of them stopped by. Right in his parlor, one offered him and a neighbor checks made out for a million dollars—and, when he held out, countered with a sum many times larger. But Coles, whose father had leased the rights to the minerals beneath the family's land to Marline back in the 1970s, had a different idea for how he was going to handle the uranium this time around. "That's the point that I decided, if it was going to be done, I was going to form my own company and do it in a way that I could assure that the interests of the community would be utmost," Coles told me. He

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got some neighboring landowners to join him. His son Walter Jr., who was working in New York as an energy sector analyst at a hedge fund, started passing around a dissertation that a Virginia Tech graduate student had written a few years before, analyzing the size and grade of the Coles Hill deposit. One copy ended up with Peter Grosskopf, president of a Canadian firm called Cormark Securities, who helped Coles and his family raise $22 million in private investment for their new company, Virginia Uranium.

At the time, early 2007, the uranium market was going through the roof. Driven in part by curbs on supply, such as an accident that disabled a big new Canadian mine, in part by a wider energy boom, and in part by raw speculation by hedge funds, the market price of uranium raced from $45 per pound in June 2006 to $136 per pound the following summer. At that valuation, the ore under Coles Hill was worth more than $16 billion. The company hired a staff, headed by Norman Reynolds, a former top Marline executive who'd stayed in Virginia, and began gearing up for an initial public offering. Uranium was about to make the Coles family very rich. There was just one problem: The mining moratorium signed by Governor Robb back in 1982 was still in force. And many of Coles's neighbors were determined to keep it that way.

One evening last year, in a hearing room behind a columned Greek Revival courthouse, the board of supervisors of Pittsylvania County gaveled its regular meeting to order. The business that night was the usual stuff of local government: renaming a road, rezoning some properties, making a $500 contribution to a hometown contestant in the state beauty pageant. It was only when the board opened up the meeting for public comments that the night's discussion turned to matters of life and death. First to the microphone was a farmer named Phillip Lovelace, who warned of contamination in local wells. "I tell you," he implored the supervisors, "uranium mining is not what we need in this county." "We want our water protected, we want our air protected, we want our land protected," said another speaker, who identified herself as Deborah "Treehugger" Dix. "Nowhere in the United States or China or Australia has uranium mining been done safely."

Most of the speakers that night were members of a group called The Alliance, one of several grassroots organizations that have taken up the fight against Walter Coles, bringing their argument to every conceivable forum: the county supervisors, the state legislature, a proliferating number of alarmist blogs. "They find examples of these horror stories," Coles counters, "and that's what they use for their fear tactics." The leader of the opposition groups—spiritually, at least, though there are obscurantist fractures—is a man named Jack Dunavant, a civil engineer and a councilman in the town of Halifax, which is about 30 miles downstream from Coles Hill. Dunavant heads an organization called Southside Concerned Citizens, which formed to fight uranium mining three decades ago and has since taken up a number of other local environmental causes, such as regulation of the hog industry. "We had hoped that uranium mining had been put to death with the moratorium," Dunavant told me. "But where there's money involved, there's always the greedy fingers that want to stir the pot again."

Dunavant claims that Coles is only playing the benevolent country patrician. "You have to know Walter to appreciate that it's baloney," he says. "He is in it for the money—that's all." Dunavant thinks Coles is merely a front man for multinational mining interests and decries the fact that Virginia Uranium has hired a phalanx of lobbyists to press its case for lifting the moratorium. Like other mining opponents, he tends to cast the struggle in apocalyptic terms. "If Richmond tries to shove the uranium issue down our throats," Dunavant vowed at a raucous meeting of a state legislative subcommittee last year, "we will fight until the bitter end, until the last man falls."

It may not come to that. Dunavant has influential allies—though they're rather more tempered—both in the legislature and among mainstream environmental groups like the Sierra Club. The question of whether to expand nuclear power splits environmentalists, but uranium mining is something most everyone in the movement agrees is problematic. In the past, exhausted pit mines were often left neglected, or used as swimming holes, and some are now EPA-designated Superfund sites. On a Navajo reservation that spans several Western states, homes have been found to be contaminated with radiation from mines that began operating in the 1940s.

The Piedmont Environmental Council, which has long opposed uranium mining in Virginia, says that the 1980s plan would have entailed blasting out a hole 110 acres in area and 850 feet deep. "That would have left an open pit there that would fill with water," Coles admits. "Well, I didn't like that back then and I don't like it today." Virginia Uranium has promised to set aside funds at the outset to eventually return the site of the mine to its original green and contoured condition.

But concerns about uranium mining are more about safety than aesthetics. Uranium occurs naturally in miniscule concentrations, and extracting it from a large body of ore involves a dusty milling process that leaves behind a sizeable quantity of waste rock, which is worthless but can still contain radionuclides such as radium and thorium. A 2007 EPA study concluded that the health effects associated with closed mines were a function of distance: People who worked in them or lived nearby, like the Navajos, might be at "quite high" risk; as one's distance and frequency of exposure decreased, the dangers appeared to become insubstantial. Environmental advocates point out that such studies, which were all done out West, may understate the hazards for Virginia. "Even though we think of it as being a very rural area, it's really densely populated compared to other places where uranium is mined,"

Uranium was about to make the Coles family very rich. There was just one problem: a state ban on uranium mining.

says Kay Slaughter, a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center. Rainfall levels are also considerably higher, with occasional hurricanes and floods. Mining opponents hypothesize that contamination could infiltrate the watershed that feeds Virginia Beach.

The Coles family responds with its own scientific evidence, suggesting that the public-health risks associated with uranium are negligible. The worst cases of contamination happened before tight regulation, they say, and, while mines do emit radiation, that's all around us anyway. The material inside a household smoke detector is a thousand times more radioactive than a handful of uranium ore. Nonetheless, the company's disposal plans call for sealing the leftover ground-up rock in capped underground cells, in keeping with federal standards, which call for enclosures built to last as long as 1,000 years. Of course, the very fact that the waste has to be sealed away for centuries is an indication that uranium's dangers are not just a figment of critics' imaginations.

So who is right—Coles or his opponents? At the very least, uranium min-

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ing is an environmentally disruptive and unprecedented proposition for Virginia, and much remains uncertain about its potential impacts. Coles realized that, without more data, he'd never be able to convince Virginia's House of Delegates and Senate to lift the moratorium that was still on the books. So he decided to start with an intermediate step, proposing a study to weigh the science and economics. Both he and mining opponents recognized, however, that this superficially innocuous tactic—who could oppose knowing more?—was really the first move in a determined campaign. "Many of the elected delegates are waiting for the study," Coles told me, "to give them cover to take a position on this." His enemies, suspecting a whitewash, mobilized against the inquiry: They knew that if they could deny Coles the right answers, they'd kill his plans.

When Coles first went to the legislature in 2008, the proposal for a uranium study met with cautious approval. The nuclear industry is important to Virginia, which is home to two commercial plants; Northrop Grumman and Areva, a French energy conglomerate, are currently building a $360 million facility to manufacture reactor components in Newport News. Moreover, the area around Coles Hill has been wracked in recent years by the shrinking demand for tobacco, downsizing at several industrial plants, and the closure of a textile mill. Coles says that, once his mine is up and running, it will employ several hundred people and generate taxable revenues of $300 million a year. Democrat Tim Kaine, the governor in 2008, embraced the study proposal, and many Republican legislators were equally supportive. It didn't hurt that Virginia Uranium had a lot of friends in Richmond, ties that were notable even by the intertwined standards of the state capitol. One of the company's investors had a son who was a GOP state senator representing Pittsylvania County. Walter Coles's brother-in-law, Whitt Clement, a former state cabinet secretary, was lobbying for the company, along with a number of Richmond's top power brokers.

Nonetheless, on its first try, the proposal died in the House of Delegates. "It was just a rubber stamp for mining," says Watkins Abbitt, an independent and one of two members whose opposition, due to worries about environmental risks, stopped the bill in the Rules Committee. But Coles kept pushing, and he managed to get another governmental body, the Coal and Energy Commission, to take up a proposal to outsource the study to the unquestionably independent National Academy of Sciences, which would appoint a committee of experts to assess costs, benefits, and dangers. After many months of hearings and debate, the commission approved the study. Under an agreement signed late last month, Virginia Uranium will provide $1.7 million in financing for the report but will exercise no influence over the makeup of the committee or its findings.

"The focus is increasingly favorable to us," Coles recently told me. It was a few days after President Obama's State of the Union address, and Coles finally felt that some momentum was building behind America's long-promised—but never realized—"nuclear renaissance." In his speech, Obama had talked about "building a new generation of safe, clean nuclear power plants," winning a rare round of applause from Republicans, and he'd followed up a few days later with a proposal for $54 billion in loan guarantees. From a local perspective, Coles was even more encouraged by the GOP response to the State of the Union, delivered by Virginia's new governor Bob McDonnell, who talked about the need to "unleash" nuclear power.

On the other hand, Coles knew as well as anyone that the problems that had long beleaguered the nuclear industry hadn't disappeared. Nuclear dread was persistent and not always unjustified: In Vermont, the state legislature recently voted to close down an aging plant after repeated malfunctions. Building reactors still required prohibitive amounts of capital—that first proposed plant in Georgia was budgeted to cost $14 billion. And Obama's nuclear proposals faced the usual politically daunting prospects. New plants were supposed to be a tradeoff to entice Senate Republicans to vote for legislation to control carbon emissions, but the chances of that happening in a midterm election year appeared slim. And then, there was McDonnell, who had campaigned on a promise to turn southern Virginia into "America's energy corridor" and acted positively giddy about the prospect of drilling for oil and natural gas off Virginia's shores, but who was taking a noncommittal stance when it came to mining uranium. The company's allies in Richmond were sending signals that the governor would be with them when it counted, but McDonnell was publicly reserving judgment until he saw the National Academy of Sciences report. Unfortunately, it wasn't due to be completed until late 2011, which meant a lot more waiting.

Over the past two years, Coles's company, held in limbo by the legislative process, has struggled mightily. The 2007 uranium bubble, like so many others, popped in 2008. In the face of a collapsing market, Virginia Uranium's IPO was scrapped. The price of uranium now appears to have stabilized around $40 per pound—about one-third of what it was at its peak.

Walter Coles Jr., who goes by Walt, handles the financial side of Virginia Uranium. A voluble, red-haired 37-year-old, he spends a lot of time in New York, and, not long ago, we met at a bar in Greenwich Village. Over the summer, Virginia Uranium had merged with a small, publicly traded Canadian mining firm, a move that allowed the company to sell stock, though the Coles family retained majority control. Walt said he hoped that going public would help the company raise enough funds to stay in existence until the legislature acted. He was frustrated by the delays and with what he considered to be the know-nothing attitudes of mining opponents. "An engineer said to me that you can get more radiation from eating a banana than from standing next to a truckload of one percent uranium ore," Walt said. He's hoping the forthcoming study will defuse the fear. If the experts give a vote of confidence, and the legislature lifts the moratorium, Walt and his father calculate that it will take them another five years to get the mine up and running. If the experts say no—well, it's probably back to farming.

So the fate of Coles Hill now rests in the hands of science. If you want to get figurative, you could say that it resides inside an anonymous sheet-metal shed on a low point of the Coles family property. Inside, on shelves that reach the roof, are long cardboard boxes filled with cylindrical pieces of rocks. They're core samples drilled 30 years ago by Marline (they now belong to the Virginia Museum of Natural History), plus some collected recently by Coles—more than 65,000 feet in all. For the last few years, the samples have been tested not only by Coles's company, which wants more information about their composition for mining purposes, but also by geologists, who want to understand what Coles Hill tells us about the Triassic Basins. Their work is likely to form a starting point for the National Academy of Sciences study. And one day, perhaps, it may draw a map to treasures buried beneath other backyards. ◆

Andrew Rice is the author of The Teeth May Smile but the Heart Does Not Forget: Murder and Memory in Uganda.

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The Chief

You think it's so great being Rahm Emanuel?

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One of the enduring mysteries about White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel is why he took the job in the first place. At the time he accepted it, he was the fourth-ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives, a position he'd attained with considerable effort. Two years earlier, Emanuel had chaired the House Democrats' campaign arm and led the party to a 31-seat majority after a decade of futility. It was a grueling undertaking—Emanuel shed 14 pounds during the two-year stint, went months without a decent night's sleep, consumed appalling quantities of caffeine—and it entailed significant professional risk. Had Emanuel come up short in an election cycle many Democrats deemed their best shot in years, he might have spent the rest of his career on the backbenches. Instead, on the eve of Barack Obama's victory, only three colleagues stood between him and the coveted House speakership, and they were all two decades older.

So why was Emanuel so keen to walk away? The short answer is that he wasn't. Once a day between the moment Obama offered the job and the moment he took it a week later, Emanuel would call his brother Zeke—a prominent bioethicist who would later join the administration—and rant about why he should say no: "I have a great life. I'm going to rise up in the House leadership, be the first Jewish speaker," he'd bellow. Emanuel would continue in this vein for 20, 30, sometimes 40 minutes. Then he would abruptly hang up, only to start in all over again the next day.

Still, there was never much doubt he would sign on. "He had twenty-seven reasons—he wants to spend time with his kids, be a devoted father. They're at a tender age. I mean, all of them were right. But too bad," says Zeke, nodding at the family ethic of public service. "He knew he had to take the job. He had no choice. It was his duty. . . . It was everything that had gone into forty-nine years of him being raised."

One can understand Emanuel's hesitation. Laboring as White House chief of staff is fantastically difficult under any circumstances, something Emanuel learned well as an aide to Bill Clinton. Former George W. Bush chief of staff Andy Card famously arrived at the White House by 5:30 each morning and stayed until eight or nine each night. But laboring as chief of staff during the first year or two of a presidency can be a prolonged form of torture.

A new White House tends to be heavily populated with campaign personnel, many of whom have little experience at governing, much less in the West Wing. Yet they will have earned a claim on a job whether or not the chief of staff wants them there. This dynamic typically fades over time, as campaign veterans get replaced by operatives with a less personal connection to the president. When Erskine Bowles took over as Bill Clinton's third chief of staff in late 1996, he brought in two new deputies, Sylvia Matthews and John Podesta. But the tension can be a major source of frustration in the early going. And, in fact, Emanuel was denied the luxury of choosing his own deputies. (One of his preferred candidates, Tom Donilon, later resurfaced as deputy national security advisor.)

On top of which, Emanuel has his own unique set of frustrations. By virtue of his political successes and his outsized personality—the nickname "Rahmbo" sums it up—he is the object of near-constant mythologizing. On the right, there is a tendency to view him as a kind of Democratic Karl Rove—a brilliant if diabolical operative who excels in the dark art of psychological warfare. When Emanuel ran the House Democrats' campaign operation in 2006, the Republican leadership had a habit of blaming him for the party's freakish procession of scandals, such as the timing of the Mark Foley imbroglio and the indictment of Tom DeLay.

Meanwhile, to activists on the left, who have viewed Emanuel as a crypto-conservative since his Clinton-administration efforts to pass NAFTA, there is a persistent belief that he has maneuvered into the role of shadow president. In each passing disappointment—a too-small stimulus, a too-generous bank bailout, a variety of health care compromises—the left finds more evidence of his ascendant worldview. One prominent liberal radio personality refers to Emanuel as "Barack Obama's Dick Cheney," while Jane Hamsher, proprietor of the highly trafficked blog *Firedoglake*, has agitated for his ouster.

If anything, though, Emanuel is the anti-Cheney. The former Bush vice president was famous for leaving few fingerprints; often, senior White House aides weren't even aware of his involvement on an issue. But his influence touched every major administration initiative. Emanuel, by contrast, leaves more fingerprints than a twelve-fingered larcenist—thick, greasy, deeply grooved fingerprints. And yet, going down the list of Obama initiatives, one is struck by the number that resist his designs.

This probably doesn't come as a surprise to Emanuel himself, who is shrewd enough to have foreseen that he wouldn't have a free hand to impose his own governing strategy. But then, merely anticipating such constraints doesn't make them painless. In fact, some of these same strains lie at the heart of the White House's recent troubles.

To appreciate the sheer reach of the Emanuel legend, one need look no further than the upper rungs of the Obama administration. "Everyone in government believes they're working for Rahm," one Obama official recently told me. "If I were a cabinet secretary, and Rahm called me up and said, 'I think you should go left,' I would go left." This official recalls once having a casual conversation in economic adviser Larry Summers's West Wing office, when Emanuel popped his head in. Both men stopped talking and reflexively stiffened. "He was not coming in to shoot the shit—'Hey guys, what are you doing this weekend?' " this official says. "You sat up, paid attention. He has that way about him."

At 50, Emanuel has the lean, taut look of a lifelong swimmer, with broad shoulders and distractingly prominent quadriceps. But at the heart of the Emanuel mystique is the family patois, which lurches between pronounced curtness and vivid, sometimes scatological, imagery. Emanuel will casually toss

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off quips like, "You're in the bowels of nothin,' man." One former colleague recalls making two or three requests during a sensitive negotiation, only to have Emanuel respond: "Well, I guess if I can take care of Bill Clinton's blow jobs, I can take care of that."

And then there are the F-bombs, which Emanuel reels off like a verbal tic, sometimes embedding them in other words with Germanic aplomb. There is, for example, "Fucknutsville" (his pet name for Washington) and "knucklefuck" (an honorific bestowed on Republican opponents). In administration meetings, Emanuel will occasionally announce, "I think it's fucking idiotic, but it's your call." (That would be Rahm-speak for: "You have more expertise than I do on this subject.") He's even been known to use the imprecation as a term of endearment, as when he signs off friendly phone calls: "Fuck you. See you later. I love you." As Phil Kellam, one of Emanuel's star recruits from the 2006 election cycle, recently joked to me, "If you could sum up Rahm Emanuel, it would be: big ideas, big mouth, big heart, little finger." (Emanuel lost half his middle finger in a teenage accident.)

Among those most fluent in the Emanuel vernacular are members of the Obama economic team, with whom the chief of staff interacts constantly. For example, on February 10, 2009, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner delivered a speech laying out the various steps he would take to revive the financial system. The pundits promptly panned it, and the markets began to swoon. Both had expected Geithner to deliver a detailed set of remedies; instead, the secretary offered only the broad contours of a strategy.

Emanuel went ballistic. "He was like, 'How could they have let expectations get so out of whack?'" recalls one official. Soon after, he began to take a special interest in Geithner's work— in the way that a Jewish mother can be said to take a special interest in her son's romantic life.

A quick review of Geithner's schedule from one week last February will illustrate the point. On four of the five days, Geithner attended a White House senior staff meeting from 8:15 a.m. to 8:45 a.m., which Emanuel runs. In addition to this, Geithner joined a conference call with Emanuel and Larry Summers on the afternoon of Monday, February 16. On Tuesday, Geithner had a call with Emanuel scheduled from 8:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Wednesday afternoon brought Geithner to an Oval Office meeting with Emanuel, Summers, and the president. This was followed by an hour-long meeting in Emanuel's office. Geithner was back at the White House Thursday morning for a one-on-one meeting with Emanuel; Emanuel then called that afternoon and spoke to Geithner for 15 minutes. The next morning, it was Geithner who called Emanuel. A few hours later, Geithner turned up for a 90-minute meeting in Emanuel's office.

When the Treasury Department released Geithner's schedule last fall, the media made much of his conversations with Wall Street CEOs. But, as one official told me, "the interesting story wasn't that Tim speaks to bankers—every treasury secretary does. It's the extent of time he's on the phone with Rahm."

And yet, even here, the Cheney-Rove-Rasputin analogy breaks down. Emanuel wasn't dictating policy to Geithner. Rather, the mantra of the meetings was "no more surprises." (The president had inadvertently added to Geithner's February 10 fiasco by talking up the speech beforehand; Emanuel partly blamed himself for the mix-up.) As another official describes it, "Rahm did not spend a lot of time on the 'What, we have to bail friggin' AIG out? It's going to kill us politically.' He just started making sure everyone was communicating." Emanuel also wanted to ensure that, as the administration rolled out specific proposals—toxic-asset purchases, relief for troubled homeowners—Treasury sold them preemptively to journalists and Wall Street muckety-mucks.

Granted, as honest brokers go, this chief of staff can be a bit more full-contact than most. The day before Geithner unveiled his asset-purchase plan last March, Emanuel spoke with him five times by phone. Nor is it the case that Emanuel lacks strong preferences. It's just that these preferences tend to be tactical rather than substantive. And, unlike a Dick Cheney type, they evince a distinct lack of ideology.

Consider, for instance, the suspicion that Emanuel favors a loosely repurposed Republicanism, something you often hear on the left. There is no question that Emanuel has sometimes alienated liberal constituency groups. As a member of Congress, he often recruited pro-gun, anti-abortion candidates to compete in swing districts. He co-authored a book with Bruce Reed, a fellow Clinton alum who now runs the Democratic Leadership Council, proposing centrist ideas like automatic 401(k) enrollment and universal children's health care. (The latter actually resembles the health-reform "Plan B" circulating through Washington these days.)

But, while Emanuel has long been skeptical of the political merits of a robust liberalism, the problem with the broader ideological critique is that it's at odds with some of his behavior. As early as the transition, according to several administration officials, Emanuel was adamant that reform of the financial sector proceed immediately. He insisted it simply wasn't politically viable to pump hundreds of billions of dollars into the banks without showing voters that they wouldn't have to ante up all over again a few years hence. Geithner objected that fast-tracking reform would only create more uncertainty and paralyze the financial system. And there were legitimate considerations on both sides. But, suffice it to say, no one out to coddle the banks would have taken Emanuel's position.

Perhaps more to the point, unlike Cheney and Rove, Emanuel manages to lose an awful lot of internal battles for someone with an ostensible vise grip on the presidency. In the end, the financial overhaul plans did slide by a few months. Emanuel also famously disagreed with Attorney General Eric Holder's decision to prosecute September 11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in civilian court, brooding that it would alienate South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham, a potential Republican ally. He had reservations about the size of the buildup in Afghanistan, which he worried could turn into a military (and therefore political) quagmire. On health care, Emanuel was one of several senior White House aides who were skeptical of pushing a comprehensive bill last year. Emanuel didn't even entirely win on economic personnel. He favored sending Summers back to Treasury, until the president hit it off with Geithner and offered him the top job.

When Barack Obama won his U.S. Senate primary back in March 2004, the campaign suddenly required a whole new level of sophistication. The campaign manager at the time was a skilled, if little known operative named Jim Cauley, who realized the situation had changed and offered to step aside. Obama declined—even then, it wasn't his style to fire people. But he didn't exactly send Cauley a ringing endorsement, either. What he sent him was Rahm Emanuel.

Though Emanuel had generally been aloof from the campaign, he was a longtime friend of Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod. So, with another Obama confidant, Valerie Jarrett, at his side, Emanuel spent two hours grilling

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What's Next For Climate Policy?

On the morning of February 23rd, *The New Republic* hosted a conference focused on how to break the climate policy deadlock. Led by TNR editors Franklin Foer, Peter Scoblic, Noam Scheiber and Bradford Plumer, the event pulled together the most powerful voices on energy policy across the administration, Congress and the private sector.

Participants included:

Jacques Besnainou
President and CEO, Areva

Carol Browner
Director of the White House Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy

Marvin Fertel
President and CEO Nuclear Energy Institute

Dirk Forrister
Managing Director Natsource LLC

Karen Harbert
President and CEO U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Institute for 21st Century Energy

Senator John Kerry
(D-MA)

Fred Krupp
President Environmental Defense Fund

Thomas Kuhn
President Edison Electric Institute

Representative Ed Markey
(D-MA)

Todd Stern
Special Envoy for Climate Change, U.S. Department of State

Greg Staple
CEO, American Clean Skies Foundation

Bradford Plumer, Fred Krupp, Thomas Kuhn, Dirk Forrister, and Karen Harbert

"Reid called me the other day and said he wants a bill and he wants a bill soon. We're working very diligently with lots of different parties on the Hill, talking to all groups you may imagine—heavy industry, coal, natural gas, oil, you name it. They're at the table; we're thinking this through very carefully about how one can thread the legislative needle".

—Senator John Kerry

Senator John Kerry and Peter Scoblic

Carol Browner and Franklin Foer

"I ran the EPA for 8 years and before that I was in the state cabinet. To come inside a White House has been a different experience. A President who strongly believes that we have to change our energy future and if we don't do it and we don't do it soon and we don't give American companies all the right symbols, we will miss the opportunity".

—Carol Browner

"What Copenhagen represents is finally the ascension of the U.S. as a global leader on the issues, which is very important… The President identified in that meeting that he barged into an opportunity and that was an opportunity to begin to work with larger countries to forge a coalition that may be successful if the U.S. passes legislation that reduces greenhouse gases by 17% by 2020. That will give us moral leadership, political leadership, and bring the rest of the world behind us".

—Representative Ed Markey

Representative Ed Markey and Noam Scheiber

Todd Stern

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Cauley about every facet of the upcoming race: how he would raise enough money, hire the right employees, beef up the turnout operation. The unmistakable message was that the Obama high command wasn't sure Cauley was up to the job. "He was very, 'Jimmy, pick your game up,'" Cauley says. "Everyone understood where we were."

For Emanuel, the assignment would in some ways foreshadow his role in Obamaland: He was not exactly *of* Team Obama, like Axelrod and Robert Gibbs, who'd arrived just after the primary to oversee communications strategy. But he was sometimes enlisted by Team Obama to perform the tasks the candidate was loath to perform himself.

The pattern would persist once Obama arrived in the U.S. Senate—Emanuel would even remark on it. By 2006, Emanuel was running the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and Obama had become an Illinois power broker. Both men waded into a Democratic primary for a Chicago-area House seat. The race pitted Christine Cegelis, a darling of liberal activists, against Tammy Duckworth, an Iraq veteran who'd lost both legs in the war and had been recruited by the party establishment. When Duckworth narrowly won the primary, the activists singled out Emanuel for special abuse, and he was quick to hit back. "I try to expand the playing field, and then it's, 'Oh, he's bigfooting,'" he protested, according to an entertaining book about the 2006 elections by *The Wall Street Journal*'s Naftali Bendavid. "You think Obama wasn't involved? [Illinois Senator Dick] Durbin? But who gets blamed? Me. Tough guy Rahm. No one wants to blame Barack, because he is who he is. So fuck you."

As Obama closed in on the presidency, he and his top aides turned to Obamaland's unofficial head-knocker for the role of chief of staff. Recent Democratic presidents had made the mistake of choosing a sentimental candidate—as Clinton did in hiring his childhood friend, Mack McLarty. Obama had the wherewithal to resist this trap. "Really smart people know their strengths and weaknesses," an administration official recently told me. "The president knows his own weaknesses. Being the heavy is not his strong suit."

Emanuel not only had the right sensibility. His loyalty and Washington know-how were beyond question. But the very same reasons Obama needed Emanuel also made him a less-than-seamless fit.

The president-elect, after all, stood for a new era of post-partisanship and good government as much as any particular policy goal. His top campaign aides were exquisitely attuned to the strength of his personal brand. Emanuel, by contrast, was a born vote counter—an exponent of the view that civic republicanism plus 49 senators gets you exactly … nothing. "Those guys still have a campaign mentality," one administration official recently told me, referring to Axelrod and Gibbs. "It's not as clean as I'm describing it, but they're naturally protective of the guy—of the things he said and did on the campaign. There's a core tension between cleaning up Washington and getting stuff done. And Rahm is a gets-stuff-done person."

This is, in many respects, as it should be. A presidency must stand for something more than notching victories, and the two powerful aides are well aware of this. "I've always found that my job is to try and make sure that what we communicate is faithful to who the president is, what his values and beliefs are," Axelrod says. Likewise, the debate between those who tend to a president's campaign themes and those who might downplay them is often a healthy one. Nevertheless, there have been moments when these same tensions—or, more precisely, the president's unwillingness to resolve them—have set back the administration agenda.

Last summer, as public support for health care reform began to recede, the president convened a series of meetings demanding to know why Democrats were losing the communications war. For his part, Axelrod argued that the administration lacked a compelling bad guy, having cut deals and observed cease-fires with industry lobbies to help ease the bill through Congress. "Axelrod would say, 'We don't have an enemy. During the campaign, we fought against insurance companies. Now we don't have one,'" recalls one administration official. Emanuel would invariably counter that the deals were essential to holding the package together. Jeopardize the deals, and you risked jeopardizing the whole project.

From the very beginning, Emanuel had a clean, elegant theory for how to guide a health care bill through Congress. He'd closely studied each previous failure from Harry Truman to Bill Clinton and concluded that time was their biggest enemy. Because remaking the health care system is such a complex task, it necessarily requires complex legislation. And there hasn't been a 1,000-page–plus bill in history that didn't start to stink after several months. It's just too easy for opponents to cull a few smelly details.

So Emanuel placed a premium on speed. He nagged constantly, setting numerous deadlines: for discussions to conclude, for congressional committees to act, for floor votes to be held. He explored a variety of procedural and substantive options so that progress could never be halted. "He never wanted to have a moment where we didn't have a move," says one colleague.

The corollary to this theory was that speed required momentum. If the hundreds of players in Congress and the health care industry believed reform would pass, then they would act so as to make that likely. And, if they didn't believe reform would pass, then that too would become self-fulfilling. So Emanuel not only hashed out agreements with interest groups—he had them trumpeted loudly. He let it be known he was considering reconciliation (a Senate procedure prohibiting a filibuster) so that it loomed over Republicans. Each time another committee passed a health care bill (there were five in all), the White House hailed it as the second coming of the Voting Rights Act.

For the first half of last year, this was almost all you needed to know about the administration's strategy. Then, in July, the White House faced a key decision. Max Baucus, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, probably the most important of the five committees considering health care, had spent months negotiating with his Republican counterpart, Chuck Grassley, with little to show for it. Emanuel was getting antsy. He gathered his top aides and pressed for a way to hurry the process along. The Senate labor committee had produced its own health care bill. Perhaps, Emanuel wondered, Majority Leader Harry Reid could bypass Baucus and bring it to the floor. Or maybe Baucus could just stop bargaining with Grassley and let Reid move a more partisan version of his bill.

But, in the end, Obama himself favored letting Baucus negotiate until September. (Though Axelrod stresses that the president was "just as impatient as Rahm was to get moving.") In fairness, even internal skeptics believed a bipartisan package might be attainable. The problem was that, overlaid on a strategy based on speed and momentum, the extra two months exacted a major cost. As the Baucus talks lingered, the very same steps Emanuel had taken to build momentum began to weigh on the broader effort. "At the end of the day, the rational person in Ohio is thinking, 'If Pharma's for the deal, it must be good for Pharma,'" says one administration official.

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This, in turn, forced the administration to make a second fateful call: Should it try to defuse the public backlash by turning on some of the industry groups? Or should it stick with Emanuel's cooptation strategy and press ahead? Obama ultimately decided on a bit of both.

That same month, to the surprise of the leading insurers, the White House suddenly opened up a rhetorical offensive against them. Once again, the decision was defensible on its own terms. It even produced some short-term p.r. gains. Still, when layered onto the existing strategy, the new offensive created real confusion. At the same time the administration was bashing insurers, it sought to preserve deals with drugmakers and hospitals. The new attacks sent mixed signals not just to the interest groups, but also to the public at large.

It's a rather remarkable testament to Team Obama (not to mention Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid) that they managed to shepherd health care through the House and Senate late last year despite these complications. If not for the upset election of Scott Brown in Massachusetts—a development virtually no one inside or outside the White House recognized soon enough to do anything about—Obama would almost certainly have signed the most sweeping domestic policy legislation in a generation by now.

But Brown did win, triggering an agonizing, slow-motion meltdown that has yet to be fully contained. Emanuel himself deserves significant blame for failing to produce a backup plan once Brown seemed likely to win. Instead, chaos reigned in the aftermath of the election. Otherwise levelheaded Democrats, like Barney Frank, suggested reform might be dead. The president himself seemed to hint that the bill would have to be scaled back. It's possible that no amount of White House intervention could have stanched the frenzy. But, in retrospect, it's hard to believe there wasn't an alternative to the post-election leadership vacuum.

Yet, looked at another way, the episode may be the most emphatic vindication of the Emanuel approach one could ever imagine. The fact that Scott Brown is now the forty-first Republican senator is all the proof you need that nothing is certain in politics. In such a world, it's advisable to finish your business sooner rather than later, and to leave as little to fate as possible. Or, as one administration official summed it up for me: "Everything that happened was confirmation that [Emanuel] was right. It was a high-wire act. Shit happens."

In February, *The Washington Post*'s Dana Milbank penned a column defending Emanuel against a rising drumbeat of criticism, including some recent calls for his resignation. The column made several valid points about Emanuel and his value to the president. But it also indulged in caricature. While holding up Emanuel as an all-knowing sage, Milbank dismissed Gibbs as a "hyper-partisan former campaign flack" and Axelrod as a man so "blinded by Obama love" he can't think clearly.

The reaction was immediate and intense—multiple sources told me it had created tension within the White House. It also, in some respects, epitomized the Emanuel dilemma. Contrary to his cutthroat reputation, Emanuel has generally been a team player during his time as chief of staff. He tends to resist cooperation with the dozens of profiles that are written about him. He is quick to defend colleagues from the kvetching of journalists and pundits, and he has thrown himself into major initiatives whose logic he disagrees with. On health care, one administration official told me, "It may not be the thing he wanted to do his whole life. But he put his shoulder to the wheel to get the thing done." Above all, no one I spoke with for this piece questioned Emanuel's loyalty to Obama. "I've talked to Rahm every day," says his friend Paul Begala. "In the year and a month, whatever it's been, I've never heard him complain about the president."

Maybe Barack Obama just *wanted to want* a hard-nosed insider like Rahm Emanuel to execute his agenda.

Which raised an intriguing paradox. On the one hand, no one seemed to believe Emanuel had engineered the Milbank piece—even critics conceded that, if nothing else, he was too savvy for such a stunt. Nonetheless, almost all these people believed the Milbank piece was a problem for Emanuel, because less-informed outsiders would assume he was behind it, prompting a cascade of chatter about White House infighting.

It's not hard to see how this could wear on a man. At one point, when speaking to a source close to Emanuel, I referred to him as Obama's "first chief of staff," then corrected myself and allowed that he could turn out to be the only chief of staff. The source affected a kind of gallows-humor tone and assured me Emanuel would not be the only one. I began to understand where the various Rahm-is-leaving rumors come from.

True to form, Emanuel refused to speak to me on the record. But, in early March, I asked Axelrod the question I would have put to him: Has the president's goal of promoting transparency, civility, and accountability worked at cross-purposes with his chief of staff's strategy for hustling the agenda through Congress? "Look, there are things the president insisted on that wouldn't have been at the top of Rahm's list," Axelrod told me. "The kinds of things the president felt strongly about as a way of keeping faith with his fundamental belief that we have to change the way we do business in this town. It wasn't that Rahm was negative on that, but he would not have made them the first thing on his list."

In any case, Axelrod continued, it's hard to believe these pledges rank very high among Emanuel's many burdens. "Look, it's a tough time to govern. We inherited multiple crises. And a very sour economy. And that creates political problems in and of itself. Governing is very, very tough," he said.

There is considerable truth to this. On the other hand, the enormity of the challenges Barack Obama faces, and the ambitiousness of his program, mean he has almost no margin for error. Indeed, Emanuel—the grizzled, battle-hardened Washington insider—was brought into the Obama White House for precisely this reason, because Obama was shrewd enough to recognize the chasm between campaigning and governing, and that what works in one domain can be debilitating in the other. Put simply, Emanuel is the chief of staff most presidents turn to when they realize their first chief of staff has failed them. To hire Rahm is to skip right to Leon Panetta without first enduring Mack McLarty.

But what we're discovering is that Obama wasn't prepared to give up on his campaign ideals so quickly. Deep down, he didn't necessarily want a hard-nosed insider to execute his agenda; maybe he just *wanted to want* such a person. For all of his flaws, Rahm Emanuel was supposed to be the man who helped Barack Obama do things the easy way rather than learn lessons the hard way. But, sometimes, deciding to go the easy way can be the hardest thing of all. ◆

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You deserve a factual look at . . .

Racism in the Islamic World

How can peace prevail in the Middle East in the face of Islamic bigotry and hate? When will moderate Muslims speak out?

For years, the U.N., led by Islamic and Arab nations and their sympathizers, has accused Israel of racism and "apartheid." That is nonsense, of course. But the world consistently turns a blind eye to open, seething anti-Semitism in Islamic society.

What are the facts?

In one of the most astonishing propaganda coups ever, a United Nations conference on racism, which took place in Durban South Africa, declared that Zionism is racism. No wonder the U.S. and Israel walked out of the meeting, which was dominated by representatives of Islamic and Arab states and other anti-Israel forces, and whose conclusions were predictable from the outset.

The supreme irony of this conference was that it accused no other nation of racism—only Israel. In truth, Israel is perhaps the most racially and ethnically diverse and tolerant country in the world. More than half of Israel's Jewish population consists of people of color—blacks from Ethiopia and Yemen, as well as brown-skinned people from Morocco, Iran, Syria, Egypt and Israel itself. In addition, Israel's population includes more than one million Arabs, who enjoy the same civil rights as Jewish Israelis. In Israel hate speech is banned, and it is against the law to discriminate based on race or religion.

> "Until Muslims reject racism in all forms, they can't expect Islam to enjoy full respect as a political and spiritual force."

In contrast, anti-Semitism—a poisonous form of racism directed specifically against the Jewish people—is rampant in most all Islamic societies. Not only is anti-Semitism commonplace in Muslim nations, but it is propagated shamelessly by their leaders, in state-sponsored media, and by Muslim clergy.

For example, former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed declared in a speech to the Organization of Islamic Conference that, "today Jews rule the world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them." Imagine if an American president had made a similarly sweeping and bigoted statement about blacks, Latinos or any other race—what a justifiable uproar, perhaps even an impeachment, would ensue. Yet there was no condemnation by the Muslim world of Mr. Mohamed's comments. Rather, virtually all of the conference's Muslim leaders actually voiced their approval.

In response to a terrorist attack in Saudi Arabia in May 2004, Crown Prince Abdullah declared that "Zionism is behind [these] terrorist actions in the kingdom." (Zionism is the code word often used by Islamic anti-Semites for Jews.) Tom Lantos, the late U.S. Congressman, called the Prince's assertion "an outrage . . . blatant hypocrisy," but Islamic leaders were silent. In fact, millions of Muslims still insist that Zionists were behind the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center.

Anti-Semitism is expressed so freely and ubiquitously in most Islamic societies that no citizen can escape it. During Ramadan a few years ago, Egypt's state-controlled TV aired "Horseman Without a Horse," a program based on the notorious forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, in which Jews allegedly use the blood of non-Jews to make Passover matzot. In Iran, a TV series, "Zahra's Blue Eyes," portrays "Zionists" kidnapping Palestinian children and harvesting their organs.

Perhaps nowhere is the hatred of Jews more virulent than among the Palestinians. Most perniciously, Palestinian children are taught in school that Jews are descended from apes and pigs and that the most noble thing they can do is to kill Jews. Muslim clerics like Imam Ibrahim Madiras, an employee of the Palestinian Authority, declared in a television sermon, "Jews are a cancer" and later that, "Muslims will kill the Jews . . . [and] rejoice in Allah's victory." No surprise, then, that the 1982 doctoral dissertation of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas makes the astounding claim that "Zionists" collaborated with the Nazis to annihilate the Jewish people in order to drive the survivors to Palestine.

Anti-Semitism and the prospects for peace. Islamic anti-Semitism permeates the Arab Middle East and creates an atmosphere in which Jews are reviled and represented as subhuman. How can the Palestinian people embrace peace with a people represented by their religious and political leaders as dehumanized, evil beings? Even more importantly, how can Israel be expected to trust a so-called peace partner who expresses abject hatred and murderous intent toward Jews on a daily basis? Yet the U.S. and many European nations continue to demand that Israel make one-sided sacrifices for peace with a people steeped in racism and committed to its destruction.

Until Islamic leaders muster the integrity to relentlessly condemn anti-Semitism (and its evil twin, anti-Zionism), we can't expect Israel to accept a forced peace with the Palestinians. Likewise, until moderate Muslims reject racism in all forms, they can't expect Islam to enjoy full respect as a political and spiritual force among the world's people.

This message has been published and paid for by

FLAME

Facts and Logic About the Middle East
P.O. Box 590359 ■ San Francisco, CA 94159
Gerardo Joffe, President

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Stanley Kauffmann on Films

FAITH AND WORKS

Catholic churches are where Catholic people go to pray. The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes is where Catholic people go for miracles. When I was a schoolboy, a Catholic classmate of mine had a sister with a malformed foot. Their parents, working-class people, were saving scrupulously for a trip to Lourdes, hoping for a miracle to heal their daughter's foot. The family moved away, and I never learned the end of the story; but from them I got my first encounter with fervent faith.

LOURDES
Palisades Tartan

HARLAN—IN THE SHADOW OF "JEW SÜSS"
Zeitgeist Films

THE ART OF THE STEAL
Sundance Selects

Memory of their fervor was refreshed by Jessica Hausner's *Lourdes*. This Austrian director's film is not a documentary, but it uses its story as a means to explore the procedures at the Lourdes shrine. The film is neither an obeisance nor an exposé: it is a journey through a complex institution founded on faith.

Christine, a young woman who is paraplegic and wheelchair-bound, is a member of a group that is on a mission to Lourdes. All visitors—and there are about six million a year from around the world, many of them ambulatory—either come in groups or they are grouped and are assigned a guide. These guides are either women wearing headdresses, nurses' uniforms, and red cardigans, or they are uniformed men who are members of the Order of Malta. All along the way there are priests as advisers.

Hausner's tone is set at once. The first shot could not be more thoroughly free of bloated religiosity. (*Lourdes* is not in any industrial sense a "religious" picture.) We see the cafeteria of the sanctuary before visitors arrive: waitresses are setting tables. Choral music filters in, as it occasionally does later. Thus simply, the director tells us that we are in for experience, not proselytizing. Christine's group arrives, eats—Christine has to be fed—and sets forth on its adventure.

There isn't much of a narrative, just enough to let us see most of the resources of the experience, which takes several days and includes everything from the sacred grotto to the souvenir shop. Though the pilgrims go there for miracles, the church is very strict about determining whether or not they occur. Bernadette Soubirous, a peasant girl in southwestern France, believed that she saw the Virgin Mary here eighteen times in 1858, a belief that is the bedrock of the shrine, which has subsequently had about 200 million visitors. Those who claim that their prayers here cured them of some kind of complaint are put through inquiry by a medical board; if they pass, they face a church board of inquiry. Very many have claimed cures, but only about seventy miracles have been confirmed. (The change must not only really happen, it must last.) Christine is one of the candidates for the miraculous, and we make the journey with her.

The archbishop in Shaw's *Saint Joan* says, "A miracle is an event that creates faith." But faith also creates the miracle, apparently. And, as Hausner shows, the miracle also creates jealousy. ("Why did he get helped and not me or my friends?") So miracles not only help individuals, they also nourish disappointments, with which the priests deal.

Hausner's chief accomplishment in the film, aided by her competent direction and a pleasant cast, is the maintenance of her view. She neither kneels nor winks at us. She presents an activity of faith by fellow human beings, hard or easy though it may be for us to accept it. (A physician tells me that some American Catholic hospitals occasionally send patients to Lourdes with a nurse assistant. Medicine, for these people, finds its appropriate level in the great scheme of things.) The state of mind of those who leave Lourdes still in their wheelchairs is not deeply explored here. But the film is a moving reminder of a fairly universal condition—the hunger for otherness that persists in most human beings, religious or not.

Germany continues its stern self-scrutiny. At least since *Stalingrad* (1993), Germans have been making films that examined various segments of the Nazi past. That this is a sign of generational change is underscored by the latest. *Harlan—In the Shadow of "Jew Süss"* is completely generational: this documentary concentrates on the children and the grandchildren of a prominent Nazi figure.

Veit Harlan was one of the prime film directors of the Hitlerite day. Born in 1899, he began his career in 1926 as an actor—he was a man of striking good looks—and began directing in 1935. (His first marriage, to a Jewish woman, had already been dissolved.) When Hitler and Co. took power, Harlan was compliant, was approved, and kept on working. In 1940 he was commissioned to make the anti-Semitic propaganda film *Jew Süss*. (The screenplay, bitterly enough, was based on a novel by a Jew, Lion Feuchtwanger, but its treatment of the story was drasti-

ANTHONY RUSSO

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cally canted for Nazi purposes.) The film won high official admiration. Though there is no means of accurately measuring its malevolent effect, it was seen by millions. Goebbels was so pleased with Harlan that in 1944, by which time World War II was grinding Germany down, he commissioned the director to make a patriotic historical epic called *Kolberg*, for which—even in those straitened days—more than 200,000 soldiers and sailors were detached to serve as extras.

After the war, Harlan was tried twice for aiding the Nazis and twice acquitted. He made a few more films of no distinction, and died—on Capri—in 1964. But this new film is not about him, even though he is glimpsed in footage from old interviews: it is about his children and grandchildren and niece—the states of mind and feeling of thirteen people who, in this altered age, whether they still bear the name Harlan or not, are descendants of the man who made one of the most successfully vicious of all Nazi films. (Among the odd facts, his niece was married to Stanley Kubrick.)

The director, Felix Moeller, has interviewed all those involved, apparently asking sharp questions (which we do not hear) and evoking considered, open replies. The range of response is wide, depending inevitably on the respondent's age. Harlan's son Thomas, also a film director, has carried the knowledge of his father's career through his own life like a kind of therapeutic burden. On the other hand, a granddaughter says that if Harlan had been a Resistance fighter, it would not make her heroic: why, then, should her grandfather's misdeeds taint her? Though the sense of involvement varies, virtually all Harlan's descendants have had to evolve some sort of perspective to help them.

Cinematically, Moeller flourishes. He shows again, through braided interviews, that talking heads can be used in rhythms and large thematic phrases—with a sense of movement—if the people are interesting. Besides, Moeller has interwoven relevant clips from Harlan's films and bits of past personal footage to illustrate what is being discussed. The result is a fearfully fascinating and disturbing picture. All of the family want to be treated justly, which is reasonable enough, though of course that justice would not exist if their forebear and his friends had prevailed. Once again history devolves into irony.

THROUGH THE past decade, a struggle in and around Philadelphia has come to national attention—the dispute over the Barnes Foundation. Preeminently, this foundation is known for its art museum in a suburb of the city. Its collection of Impressionist and post-Impressionist and early modern painting is glorious—Matisse, Renoir, Monet, Degas, Seurat, Picasso, and so forth by the score. (Whenever the collection is mentioned, its estimated value is also mentioned, as if to certify its quality. A current guess is $25 billion.)

The foundation was created in 1922 by the mightily rich Albert C. Barnes, a physician who developed medications that were hugely successful. The museum's condition and position have been the main points of contention. The building is in need of renovation. This and its relative inaccessibility have motivated Philadelphians of some prestige and financial clout to agitate for a new building more accessible to the city. Opposition to these proposals was equally fierce, because Barnes's will specifies that the collection remain in this building in this locality.

The conflict has evoked blasts and counter-blasts and legal proceedings, all of which are now past, according to *The Art of the Steal*. This lively documentary about the dispute, directed by Don Argott, makes its position known through its title and now serves chiefly as a reminder of how important an aesthetic decision was to a metropolitan community. It closes with a note telling us that the new building is under construction in town and will be ready, with the Barnes collection installed in it, in 2012.

But the film says little about the matter in Barnes's will that seems to me most extraordinary. In one salient aspect Barnes reminds me of the theater director Jerzy Grotowski. When Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre played in New York in 1969—three productions in an Off-Off-Broadway space—Grotowski himself was in the lobby at the entry to the space for every performance and, with only a glance, vetted each prospective member of the audience. (The attendees never numbered more than sixty.) He could tell at once, at least in his own view, whether he wanted this person to be present when his company strove for profundity. Some well-known people were turned away as—he apparently thought—mere novelty hunters. Grotowski believed that the director always "keeps in mind that he has two 'ensembles' to direct: the actors and the spectators. The performance results from an integration of these two 'ensembles.'" (I saw all three productions, and only a few other times in a lifetime of theater-going have I felt that I was part of a transcendent event.) In short, Grotowski wanted his audience to be collaborative, as far as he could foretell, in what was going to happen.

Barnes had much the same idea about his museum. His will stipulated that admission to his collection was mostly to be granted in response to written applications, not all of which would be honored. He loathed those museumgoers who were mere strollers-through or vogue addicts, and frequently said so. He apparently wanted his visitors to know that they were specially privileged—not by him but by the artists. This was no kind of snobbism: he encouraged people from every stratum of society. (His own background was working class.) And it should be noted that on one social subject he was advanced: race. He involved Lincoln University, a historically black college near Philadelphia, in the foundation's structure from the beginning. Two of the past presidents of the foundation are black men.

This selective aspect of the museum will apparently be lost. In the name of democracy, as well as increase in revenues, it seems that admission will be unencumbered by any test of the person's seriousness. Obviously, the control of museum admissions is a different matter from admissions to a small theater space. But the opponents of the new site, the Barnes loyalists, feel that the Barnes collection will now become just another tourist stop. The matching of art and viewer will no longer be attempted. The intentions of Barnes's admission plan are now history. ◆

Leaving the Field

The grove we approach looks dark as a wound
we'll enter, as the cicadas drone
through leaves with an off-key, faltering hum
that strengthens as it resolves. You are down,
it intones and we are: low, separate from
cicadas that vibrate on limb after limb
in slurred, ragged waves of excitement, flung
by the monumental furnace that drives them.
The wires and caverns of burning life seem
intensely their own, to those of us listening.
The fact is, they don't know we listen,
don't care, and don't say a thing that's human.
Their sound is a strong and useful change
to us, who believe we are used to change.

LISA WILLIAMS

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Adam Kirsch

AGAINST BEAUTY

CHANGING MY MIND: OCCASIONAL ESSAYS
By Zadie Smith
(Penguin Press, 306 pp., $26.95)

One of the running jokes in *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith's third novel, is that its main character is philosophically opposed to beauty. Howard Belsey is a professor of art history at Wellington College, and like all middle-aged professors in campus novels, he is a ludicrous figure—unfaithful to his wife, disrespected by his children, and, of course, unable to finish the book he has been talking about for years. In Howard's case, the book is meant to be a demolition of Rembrandt, whose canvases he sees as key sites for the production of the Western ideology of beauty.

"What we're trying to . . . *interrogate* here," Howard drones in a lecture on Rembrandt's *Seated Nude*, "is the mytheme of artist as autonomous individual with privileged insight into the human. . . . What are we signing up for when we speak of the 'beauty' of this 'light'?" Throughout this rather stereotypical classroom vaudeville, Smith cements the reader's antagonism to Howard and his cheap aesthetic nihilism by having us view it through the eyes of his most naïve student, Katie Armstrong, a sixteen-year-old from the Midwest who is uncomplicatedly in love with art. "She used to dream about one day attending a college class about Rembrandt with other intelligent people who loved Rembrandt and weren't ashamed to express this love," Smith writes, and she makes us indignant at Howard on Katie's behalf. Indignation turns to scorn when it turns out that Howard Belsey is just as enthralled by beauty as anyone—specifically, by the beauty of another young student, Victoria Kipps, with whom he has a disastrous affair.

Howard's downfall—he loses his wife and his career—is the revenge of beauty, and in the novel's last scene Smith forces Howard to admit defeat. He is standing before a distinguished audience, about to deliver the talk that will determine his academic future, when he realizes that he has left his speech in the car. He is left to cycle emptily through his slides, finally allowing Rembrandt's pictures to speak for themselves, after all his attempts to deface them with words. And the sheer beauty of the images, in Smith's last paragraphs, becomes a promise of redemption: in Rembrandt's portrait of his wife Hendrickje, the imperfections of the skin, "chalky whites and lively pinks," are redeemed by "the ever present human hint of yellow, intimation of what is to come." In this scene, Smith delivers the traditional affirmations we look to comedy to provide: beauty, love, and art triumph over malice and division.

Readers who remember Howard Belsey will surely be surprised to open Smith's new collection of non-fiction, and find that it contains a frontal attack on the idea of beauty in fiction. This essay "Two Directions for the Novel" is one of the high points of *Changing My Mind*, which in addition to literary criticism includes Smith's film and travel writing—proficient but unremarkable—and a fine memoir of her father. First published in 2008, the essay is a manifesto in the form of a review of two novels, Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, which offer Smith an eloquent contrast, not least in their worldly careers.

Netherland will be well known to anyone who reads fiction; it was one of the most acclaimed novels of 2008. (The paperback comes with a blurb from President Obama—a publicist's dream.) *Remainder*, on the other hand, was at best a *succès d'estime*, which appeared in 2007 as a paperback original after taking, Smith tells us, "seven years to find a mainstream publisher." This information comes in the very first paragraph of Smith's essay, suggesting its importance to her. Later we learn that McCarthy is the founder of a prankish manifesto-issuing group called the International Necronautical Society, and that he once expelled two writers from this society for "signing with corporate publishers," thus becoming, in his words, "complicit with a publishing industry whereby the 'writer' becomes merely the executor of a brief dictated by corporate market research, reasserting the certainties of middle-brow aesthetics."

It is clear that part of what draws Smith to McCarthy is this avant-garde puritanism, which seems so precious and anachronistic today. For Smith's own first novel—*White Teeth*, published in 2000, when she was twenty-four years old—met with what Philip Larkin (a frequent touchstone in her essays) once described as "success so huge and wholly farcical"; and ever since, she has been that rare and ambiguous thing, not just a good writer but a famous writer. There is a kind of penance in the homage that Smith pays to McCarthy's seven years in the wilderness, and a kind of self-suspicion in her description of O'Neill's book: "It's as if, by an act of collective prayer, we have willed it into existence."

Exactly the same thing might be said, with even more justice, of *White Teeth*, which was so eagerly welcomed in part because it said things that Britons in particular wanted very much to hear. In that book, Smith takes some of the most envenomed and insoluble problems of contemporary life—immigration, racism, religious fundamentalism, terrorism—and turns them into premises for comedy. Any of the characters in *White Teeth* could be the protagonist in a novel of social protest: Samad Iqbal, the educated Bengali immigrant reduced to working as a waiter; Samad's son Millat, a charismatic teenager driven by boredom and resentment to join an Islamic militant group; even the lovable sad sack Archie Jones, a native Englishman trapped at the bottom of an immutable class system.

Yet none of these figures seems threatening or truly pitiable, because they inhabit a comic universe in which conflict is inadmissible, even or especially when it is Smith's explicit subject. Sometimes this is because Smith neuters her characters with jokes: the group that Millat joins is called Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation, or KEVIN, which immediately prevents us from thinking of it as genuinely dangerous. Even the characters are in on the joke: "We are aware that we have an acronym problem," one militant says.

But this kind of self-conscious spoofing is not very frequent in *White Teeth*, and Smith's comedy is more affirmative than a mere spoof could be. Politically, her book is consoling because she tells us that rancor and racism are things of the past—problems for the grouchy old, not the exuberantly hybridized young. It is noteworthy that, in this book about Asian and Caribbean immigrants in Britain, there is only one character who is actually a racist, and he is a very minor character. This is the shut-in Mr. Hamilton, whom the three children in the book—Millat and Magid, Samad's sons, and their best friend Irie, who has a white

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English father and a black Caribbean mother—visit as part of a school-organized charity project. When the children bring the old man groceries, he launches into a homily on the importance of dental hygiene, which leads unexpectedly to this reflection: "Clean white teeth are not always wise, now are they? Par exemplum: when I was in the Congo, the only way I could identify the nigger was by the whiteness of his teeth, if you see what I mean. Horrid business. Dark as buggery, it was. And they died because of it, you see?"

This eruption of ugliness reduces the children to silence, then makes them furious and tearful. But in the novel's own terms, there is no contest between Mr. Hamilton, who makes his brief contemptible appearance and then vanishes, and the children, who are its beloved heroes. If we ask *White Teeth* the question E. M. Forster asked in *Howards End*—who is to inherit England?—there can be no doubt of Smith's answer: England belongs to Irie and Millat and Magid, and a good thing, too. Not for nothing did Smith choose as the book's epigraph "What is past is prologue."

Smith is so certain that racism is not a threat that she finds much of the novel's comedy in the attempts of well-meaning white Britons to avoid sounding racist. One of the many funny set pieces in *White Teeth* involves a parents' meeting at the children's school, where Samad harasses everyone with his attempts to get more Islamic holidays added to the school calendar. The comedy, typically for Smith, comes from the fact that no one takes this religiosity seriously—even Samad's wife keeps trying to shut him up—and that the other parents are exclusively concerned with not seeming culturally insensitive. The chairwoman of the meeting—named, jokingly but emblematically, Ms. Miniver—"wanted to check that it was not her imagination, that she was not being unfair or undemocratic, or worse still *racist* (but she had read *Colour Blind*, a seminal leaflet from the Rainbow Coalition, she had scored well on the self-test), racist in ways that were so deeply ingrained and socially determining that they escaped her attention."

As this suggests, another reason why Smith is finally so consoling is generic. Embarrassment and obliviousness are comic, but xenophobia and hatred are not; and so in *White Teeth* the latter are invariably translated into the former. This is not at all to say that Smith sets out to be funny in order to be ingratiating. Rather, her talent for comedy is so genuine that it transforms everything in its orbit into an occasion for laughter. Smith's is the true comic vision, in which all conflicts are really misunderstandings, and everyone deserves sympathy because no one is genuinely evil.

This is not the only kind of comedy, of course—for all the comparisons *White Teeth* earned to Dickens, Dickens is far more frightening, because more sensible of evil. But it is a kind of comedy to which English literature has always been hospitable, and it is remarkable how often Smith sounds like or even alludes to Kingsley Amis and P. G. Wodehouse. One of the best recurring jokes in *White Teeth* is about that hoariest of set-ups, a pair of deaf old bores in a pub. That the bores in this case are domino-playing Caribbeans, rather than darts-playing Englishmen, makes much less of a difference than one might think.

White Teeth was published in 2000, and it is intriguing to wonder what might have happened if it had been delayed by a year. After September 11, 2001, it would not have been as easy to write, or to read, a novel in which KEVIN is the face of Islamic terrorism. In fact, all the troubles that *White Teeth* asks us to see as things of the past, from immigration to imperialism, began in the last decade to look like the stuff of our future. The past is not only prologue, the past is also present, and *White Teeth* often reads like a memento of the West's brief decade of post-historical optimism.

It is notable that Smith's subsequent novels gave the themes and the setting of *White Teeth* a wide berth. *The Autograph Man* was a farce about celebrity worship and the immaturity of young men, and *On Beauty* relocated to an American college town. Near the beginning of the latter novel, Howard Belsey and his wife Kiki decide to have an anniversary party, even though the date of the party seems to disconcert many of the guests; it is clear that the date is supposed to be September 11, but Smith, as if on principle, never actually names it. Now, one of the things Smith has against *Netherland* is that it set out to be, and was praised as, "the post-9/11 novel we hoped for." "Were there calls, in 1915, for the Lusitania novel?" she asks. "In 1985, was the Bhopal novel keenly anticipated?"

The questions are willfully obtuse, since the comparisons are all wrong. Ask whether there was a post–Kennedy assassination novel, or a post–Pearl Harbor novel, and you will come closer to the effect of September 11—and get the opposite answer from the one that Smith intends. Despite her sarcasm, tragic historical events have always been legitimate inspirations for fiction. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, for example, one of the obvious progenitors of *White Teeth*, is a long fictional reflection on the bloody partition of India and Pakistan and its consequences.

But of course Smith does not mean to be just to *Netherland*. What troubles her is precisely that O'Neill did rise to the challenge of writing a "post-9/11 novel," through an intelligent use of the conventional novel form. Like all the best novels inspired by September 11, *Netherland* treats the attacks themselves very obliquely, and thus avoids the painful literalism that afflicted John Updike's *Terrorist* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. Briefly, it is the story of Hans van den Broek, a Dutch financier living in New York, whose wife and child leave the city after the attacks. In his loneliness, Hans joins an amateur cricket league whose other members are all South Asian and Caribbean immigrants; and there he befriends Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian who dreams of building a cricket stadium in New York. This story is told in prose that is consciously poetic—O'Neill courts the comparison to F. Scott Fitzgerald—and while the lyricism can sometimes feel like much of a muchness (as in Fitzgerald), it is also impressive and moving.

For Smith, however, both the story and the style of *Netherland* are objectionable, and for the same reason. It is a book in which "a community in recent crisis—the Anglo-American liberal middle class—meets a literary form in long-term crisis, the nineteenth-century lyrical realism of Balzac and Flaubert." Hans, Smith argues, is a rich tourist in New York, insulated by race and class from Chuck's struggles as an immigrant, which allows him (and O'Neill) to turn Chuck into a fetish of authenticity. Likewise, she continues, O'Neill makes a fetish of language, lavishing his powers on lyrical descriptions that prevent any sharp, unsettling encounter with the real. But this "lyrical realism," Smith rules, is an obsolete form, unable to capture either the social dislocations or the phenomenological reality of life in our time. "Out of a familiar love," Smith sums up, "like a lapsed High Anglican, *Netherland* hangs on to the rituals and garments of transcendence, though it well knows they are empty." It could be Howard Belsey talking.

The surprisingly conventional terms in which Smith abuses *Netherland* set up one half of a dichotomy, and *Remainder* is adduced, a little opportunistically,

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to supply the other half. If the former is plush, the latter is austere; if the former is traditional, the latter is avant-garde; if the former traffics in worn-out emblems of authenticity, the latter puts authenticity itself in question. McCarthy's novel is narrated by a man, never named, who has just emerged from a coma after being involved in a mysterious accident. He receives a huge settlement, and uses the money to recreate, in real life, places and events that have lodged in his memory: first an apartment building, then a car wash, then a murder scene. These re-enactments are highly literal—the narrator hires actors, builds sets, recreates things down to the last detail—but they are also, of course, McCarthy's metaphysical gambit, involving us in questions about the nature of reality and memory, narcissism and transcendence.

To Smith, McCarthy's programmatic deconstruction of the real is a good antidote to O'Neill's piety about it. Lyrical realism is doubly inauthentic, in its beauty and in its received notion of the integral self; whereas McCarthy's prose is deliberately dull and matter-of-fact, and the self at the heart of his story is always already ejected from itself, and must try by means of grandiose re-enactments to achieve an illusory, remembered unity. In both ways, Smith casts *Remainder* as the bonfire of *Netherland*'s vanities: "it means . . . to shake the novel out of its present complacency. It clears away a little of the deadwood, offering a glimpse of an alternate road down which the novel might, with difficulty, travel forward."

Even without going deeply into the relative merits of the two novels, it is apparent that there is something forced—dare one say inauthentic?—about the use that Smith makes of them. Smith argues that O'Neill is a writer of the day before yesterday, a Flaubertian aesthete, while McCarthy points the way to a stripped-down, decentered future. But it is impossible to read *Remainder* without being struck by how familiar, how conventional, its avant-garde gestures are. The demonstratively undemonstrative protagonist reminds us of Camus's Meursault, and his phenomenological alienation of Sartre's Roquentin. Smith lauds the scene in which McCarthy's narrator is repelled by the actuality of a carrot—"this carrot . . . was more active than me: the way it bumped and wrinkled, how it crawled with grit"—but does not mention that it alludes to the most famous moment in *Nausea*, when Roquentin contemplates a tree's roots. This kind of anti-lyricism is by now its own kind of lyricism.

More misleading still is Smith's suggestion that McCarthy's coolly stylized novel has a truer grasp of the real than O'Neill's warmly stylized one. "In place of the pleasure of the rich adjective," Smith asserts, "we have an imagined world in which logistical details and logical consequences are pursued with care and precision: if you were to rebuild an entire house and fill it with people re-enacting actions you have chosen for them, this is exactly how it would play out. Every detail is attended to." But if you turn to the relevant section of *Remainder*, you find that McCarthy describes the "logistical details" of the re-enactment this way:

> We'd receive faxes on the machine we had in our car and stuff them into the back-seat glove compartment as the driver raced us to another meeting, then forget that we'd received them and have them re-faxed or go back to the same office or the same warehouse again—so the humming in our ears was constant, a cacophony of modems and drilling and arpeggios and perpetually ringing phones. The hum, the meetings, the arrivals and departures turned into a state of mind—one that enveloped us within the project, drove us forward, onwards, back again.

So McCarthy's realism turns out to be abstract, generalized, aestheticized. If you actually did want to re-build an entire house and fill it with re-enactors, this passage would be totally useless as a guide—you would not know where to begin, much less how to finish. In fact, McCarthy has no interest in the logistical side of the re-enactments, which is why he introduces a character called Naz to serve as the narrator's factotum. Naz deals with reality, so the narrator and the novel can dwell on sensation.

Reading *Netherland*, by contrast, it is constantly clear how much diligent observation went into O'Neill's descriptions of parts of New York life that the average fiction reader, not to mention writer, will never see. O'Neill's description of the "2003 Annual Gala of the Association of New York Cricket Leagues" may or may not be based on a real event, but reading it one feels that if it took place, it would have been just like this: in this kind of vulgarly elegant event hall, in this remote part of Queens, with these guests of honor (a state assemblyman, a low-ranking functionary from the mayor's office), and these corporate sponsors (Air Jamaica, Red Stripe). Far from suggesting that lyrical realism is a fraud, the experience of reading O'Neill and McCarthy side by side suggests that it is precisely an interest in reality that enables and justifies a novelist's lyricism. It is because O'Neill is so attentive to the world that he attempts to capture it in the only way language allows—poetically.

Smith has misread these books, but she has done so in a way that is suggestive about her own writerly ambitions and anxieties. In linking the (alleged) debility of the novel to the (alleged) crisis of the Anglo-American liberal middle class, Smith is making a connection that is not especially pertinent to *Netherland*. (Hans van den Broek is neither Anglo-American nor middle-class. He is a rich Dutchman.) But it is at the very heart of another writer who is much more important to Smith than Joseph O'Neill: E. M. Forster, who is the subject of another significant essay in *Changing My Mind*.

When Howard Belsey, in *On Beauty*, happens to pick up a copy of *A Room With a View* that is lying around in his father's apartment, he mutters: "Forster. Can't stand Forster." With his principled suspicion of beauty and truth and humanism, Howard would have to hate Forster, whose fiction often reads like a sermon on behalf of those very things. But what Howard does not know, and the reader cannot miss, is that the novel in which he exists is a sustained homage to *Howards End*. The Belseys, the academic liberals of Smith's novel, loosely correspond to Forster's Schlegels, while the Kippses—whose daughter Victoria is Howard's undoing—are versions of the conservative and business-like Wilcoxes. At several points in *On Beauty*, Smith offers clever and affectionate parodies of famous moments from *Howards End*: Forster's description of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, for instance, becomes Smith's description of Mozart's Requiem.

Smith's large indebtedness to Forster, in what is probably her best and certainly her most mature novel, makes her ambivalence in the Forster essay all the more striking. "It should be obvious from the first line," Smith writes in the acknowledgments to *On Beauty*, "that this is a novel inspired by a love of E. M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or the other." But in her essay, Smith now feels that "there is something middling about Forster; he is halfway to where people want him to be." (The title of the essay is "E. M. Forster, Middle Manager.") Smith tries to argue that this middlingness is healthy humility, rather than

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mediocrity: "He could sit in his own literary corner without claiming its superiority to any other." We may feel that Forster pales in comparison to his contemporaries—Joyce, Woolf, Eliot—but Smith gives him credit for acknowledging their greatness: "Forster was not Valéry, but he defended Valéry's right to be Valéry."

But defense is a feeble kind of recognition, and the metaphor of rights does not really belong in literary criticism. A writer's right to write must certainly be defended from a mob of book-burners or a committee of censors, but when it comes to aesthetic judgment what matters is not that a writer has a right, but that his writing be right. And if the writer with whom Smith most publicly identifies is merely a middle manager—a "Notable English Novelist, common or garden variety," as she also puts it—how can she help but wonder if she herself is right enough? "There's magic and beauty in Forster, and weakness, and a little laziness, and some stupidity," she sums up. "He's like us." That is not what many writers would choose as their epitaph.

Is it any wonder, then, that in castigating the tradition of "lyrical realism"—the term she coins for O'Neill, but that describes Forster, and especially *Howards End*, quite exactly—Smith writes with the passion and injustice that an artist usually brings to her self-interrogations? "I have written in this tradition myself," Smith acknowledges, "and cautiously hope for its survival, but if it's to survive, lyrical realists will have to push a little harder on their subject." And what draws Smith to *Remainder*, it is fair to say, is its appearance of pushing very hard, of sacrificing beauty (and popularity) in the name of truth. The same feeling animates her tribute to David Foster Wallace, the last piece in *Changing My Mind*. "Wallace chose the path of most resistance," Smith writes, "he battled his gifts rather than simply display them, seeming to seek the solution in a principle of self-mortification."

Taken together, these essays suggest a writer engaged in a reconsideration, perhaps a refashioning, of her own methods and values. She seems torn between her sense of what fiction ought to be—up-to-the-minute, theoretically informed, self-consciously strenuous—and what her own fiction actually is: traditional, popular, and affirmative, as well as intelligent and literary. It is troubling that Smith seems to be programmatically denigrating exactly the qualities that made her first three books not only successful, but also good: the abundance and inventiveness and love of the grotesque that seemed to be evolving, in *On Beauty*, into a deeper and more moving kind of comedy.

Changing My Mind includes a memoir of Smith's late father, "Dead Man Laughing," that is perhaps the most powerful narrative writing she has done so far. In explaining her father's love of British television and stand-up comedy, Smith creates a much darker and more affecting portrait of him than she did in *White Teeth*, where Harvey Smith was the model for Archie Jones. The moment in this memoir when Smith "put my finger in the dust of my father"—his cremated remains have been in a Tupperware box on her desk—"and put the dust into my mouth and swallowed it," provokes the kind of dreadful laughter—"I laughed as I did it"—that her fiction has so far seldom attempted. It leaves the reader curious to see what kind of writer will emerge from Smith's half-acknowledged crisis of literary conscience. ◆

Christopher Benfey
MR. COFFEE AND MR. FIXIT

RAYMOND CARVER: COLLECTED STORIES
By Raymond Carver
(Library of America, 1019 pp., $40)

RAYMOND CARVER: A WRITER'S LIFE
By Carol Sklenicka
(Scribner, 578 pp., $35)

In the summer of 1984, the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami and his wife traveled to the remote coastal town of Port Angeles, Washington, to visit Raymond Carver in the glass-walled "Sky House," overlooking the ocean, which he shared with his partner, the poet Tess Gallagher. It was more of a pilgrimage than a social call. Murakami, who had run a jazz bar in Tokyo before taking up writing six years earlier at the age of twenty-nine, admired Carver more than any other writer. Although they had never met, he considered Carver "the most valuable teacher I had." Murakami had embarked on the epic task of translating all of Carver's writings—stories, poems, essays—into Japanese. He had somehow concluded that Carver must be "thin and delicate," and was surprised by his massive shoulders and big hands. As Carver sipped black tea instead of the alcohol he had sworn off after thirty years of dangerously heavy drinking, Murakami felt that his idol "sat on the sofa with his body crouched up as if to say that he had never intended to get so big."

The first thing Murakami had read of Carver's was "So Much Water So Close to Home." In that classic story, four friends go on a fishing trip to a distant river. On their first day out, they find a woman's naked body in the river. Rather than allowing this awkward discovery to interrupt their long-anticipated frolic, they tether the corpse to shore with a piece of nylon cord and proceed to fish for two more days, telling stories—"coarse stories," in the longer version of the story that Murakami read—over the campfire. The wife of one of the men, appalled by her husband's behavior, feels a strange kinship with the murdered woman in the river, and attends the funeral. Reading this story, Murakami felt that he was in the presence of "an entirely new kind of fiction." While Carver's style was "fundamentally realistic," he noted, there was "something penetrating and profound in his work that goes beyond simple realism."

The two shy writers spoke so softly that the tape Murakami made of their conversation sounded like "a badly done wiretap." They speculated, according to a commemorative poem that Carver wrote, about the reasons for Carver's popularity in Japan. Perhaps, Murakami suggested, it was the way he wrote of small humiliations that become unbearable, a recognizable phenomenon in contemporary Japan, or maybe it was how he wrote of chance determining the course of individual lives. In an interesting note appended to his translation of the *Analects* of Confucius, the Belgian Sinologist Simon Leys suggested another possible reason for the resonance of the story in Asia. Respect for the dead, "always at the heart of every humanistic civilization," has become, according to Leys, "only a dim memory" in the West. Carver, he adds, "perhaps one of the most sensitive witnesses of our present cultural collapse, has given a chilling illustration

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of this deterioration in one of his stories, 'So Much Water So Close to Home.'"

Murakami invited Carver to come to Japan, and later had a large bed built for his Tokyo apartment in anticipation of the visit. But Carver, diagnosed with lung cancer in 1987, was too sick to travel to Japan or anywhere else. He died in August 1988, in Port Angeles, at the age of fifty.

At the time of his death, Carver left two ambiguous and bedeviling bequests. One was his will, drawn up in 1982, leaving five thousand dollars each to his first wife and two children, and the rest of his estate to Gallagher, whom he married just before his death. The other was his literary testament of published and unpublished writings. Gallagher was named the legal executor of both. The will, as Carol Sklenicka reports in her generally even-handed and well-informed biography of Carver, predictably provoked a great deal of legal wrangling and ill feeling, which was eventually resolved, at least financially, in various legal settlements. But there remains the puzzling case of Carver's literary estate, specifically the ongoing—and now, with the publication of the excellent Library of America edition of the stories, readily available—co-existence of competing versions of his stories. One might reasonably think that the publication of a reliable biography of the man and an authoritative edition of his writings might bring some closure to things.

Raymond Clevie Carver was born in 1938 in the lumber town of Clatskanie, Oregon. His father, known as C.R., had come west from Arkansas, on foot and by boxcar, looking for work, and learned to sharpen saws for a living. When demand for lumber slumped during the Depression, C.R. worked on the Grand Coulee Dam, the New Deal project that Woody Guthrie called "the biggest thing that man has ever done." He was a heavy drinker and chased women. The rental houses in which Carver grew up were the scenes of domestic squalor and occasional violence. In his fine essay "My Father's Life," Carver remembered an occasion when his mother hit his father "between the eyes with a colander and knocked him out."

Carver, nicknamed "Frog" as a child, was teased for being overweight and for living in a shack with an outhouse in the backyard. He spent his free time fishing, reading Tarzan novels, and trying to grow up fast. In 1955, he met a pretty girl named Maryann Burk, just shy of her fifteenth birthday, and married her two years later. Their first child, Christine, was born in the same hospital where C.R. was receiving electroshock treatments after suffering a nervous breakdown. Carver went upstairs to give his father the good news.

> They let me in through a steel door and showed me where I could find him. He was sitting on a couch with a blanket over his lap. Hey, I thought. What in hell is happening to my dad? I sat down next to him and told him he was a grandfather. He waited a minute and then he said, "I feel like a grandfather." That's all he said. He didn't smile or move. He was in a big room with a lot of other people. Then I hugged him, and he began to cry.

In 1958, the young couple moved to Paradise, California, where Ray, twenty years old at the time, enrolled at Chico State College. During the following years, they held multiple "crap jobs," as Carver called them. She waited on tables and worked as a switchboard operator; he worked in a drugstore and mopped floors in a hospital.

At Chico State, Carver had the amazing good luck to enroll in a creative writing class taught by John Gardner, who had a doctorate in medieval literature but was still a long way from publishing his novels *Grendel* and *October Light*. Gardner recognized something in Carver's flailing attempts at writing fiction, and let him borrow his office on weekends to get some work done away from the kids—a second child, Vance, was born that same year. Carver later wrote, in a bitter essay called "Fires," that the major influence on his writing career was having children when he and his wife were not grown up themselves. It dawned on him "that I would always have them and always find myself in this position of unrelieved responsibility and permanent distraction."

In an early story called "The Father," a little girl says that the new baby looks like Daddy. But what exactly does Daddy look like? The assembled family concludes that Daddy, sitting in a chair with his back to them, "doesn't look like anybody." Sklenicka suggests, plausibly enough, that the story expresses Carver's sense of being "effaced by the swirl of life around him." Reading Sklenicka's chapters about the Carvers' early married life, one is surprised that any writing at all got done. Maryann, who eventually trained to be a schoolteacher, comes across, in Sklenicka's telling, as an admirable and loyal partner: "Her shoulders were thin, but her willpower was prodigious."

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Carver's life during the 1960s was perhaps no more chaotic than that of many other artists during what he called those "furious" years. He bounced from school to school and job to job, getting a B.A. along the way at Humboldt State and a scholarship to study, along with seemingly every other writer of his generation, at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which he entered during the fall of 1963 and later returned to as an instructor (and a regular drinking partner of John Cheever). At Iowa he wrote his first major story, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please," about a couple named Ralph and Marian—why not just Ray and Maryann?—strained by jealousy, poverty, and alcohol. The story gives a vivid sense of Carver's own turmoil at the time. The main character "took some classes in philosophy and literature and felt himself on the brink of some kind of huge discovery about himself. But it never came."

"Will You Please Be Quiet, Please" was selected for *Best American Short Stories 1967*. It was a momentous year for Carver, who took what he called his "first white-collar job" as a textbook editor at a Palo Alto firm. A friend introduced him to a young editor and aspiring writer named Gordon Lish, who worked at a textbook company nearby. A Long Island kid who had been teased at Phillips Academy for being a "dirty little Jew," Lish had drifted west in a vague search for Jack Kerouac's fictional hero Dean Moriarty. Lish admired Carver's writing, but felt that he could improve it. He was bothered by the ending of "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please," in which Ralph and Marian come together in an open-ended moment of understanding. Lish let it be known that if he had written the story, Ralph would have left his wife. "Well, that's just the point, Gordon," Maryann says she told him. "It isn't your story. You didn't write it."

Maryann's rejoinder, however reasonable and even decisive it sounds, turned out to be not quite accurate. As Lish ascended the publishing ladder back in New York, from fiction editor at *Esquire* to editor at Alfred A. Knopf (where he dubbed himself "Captain Fiction"), he enthusiastically published Carver's stories along the way. His editing of Carver's stories, however, sometimes verged uneasily on re-writing. The first thing Lish did to Carver's stories was to make drastic cuts. In two rounds of editing, he curtailed the manuscript of seventeen stories published by Knopf in 1982, as the hugely popular and influential *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, by more than half. Carver was so shocked by the result that he wrote a long anguished letter to Lish, in July 1980, beginning with the line, "I've got to pull out of this one."

Carver was especially upset with what had become of a story called "Where Is Everyone?," reduced from ten pages (in the restored Library of America version) to barely two and a half. In the longer version, the narrator is dealing with two crises: his sixty-five-year-old mother is dating men she meets at her singles club, and his estranged wife, Cynthia, is dating a man called Ross. Nicknamed alternatively "the weasel or Mr. Fixit," Ross is "an unemployed aerospace engineer she'd met at AA." The story is leisurely in its pace, meandering from the narrator's reading—he is particularly taken with a deathbed scene in a novel by Italo Svevo, in which a dying old man uses his last ounce of strength to slap his son's face as hard as he can—to details about Ross's work for NASA, where there are "Mr. Coffees in every office." At one point, he asks Ross "whether, if I pulled out (I had no intention of pulling out of course; it was just harassment), he intended to support Cynthia and our kids." The story ends with the narrator retreating to his mother's house, where she makes him dinner and he goes to sleep, before waking up, confused, in his sweat-soaked pajamas. "A snowy light filled the room. There was a roaring coming at me. The room clamored. I lay there. I didn't move."

Lish saw an opportunity for reconstructive surgery. It is tempting to read the story as edited by Lish, which he renamed "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit," as an allegory for the working relationship of the manic storyteller (Mr. Coffee or Mr. Carver) and the patient fix-it man, Lish himself. Oddly, in his letter Carver threatens to "pull out" of his arrangement with Lish just as his narrator threatens to "pull out" of his marriage with Cynthia. Gone in the final and radically compressed version was any mention of Svevo. The final scene was transposed from the mother's house to the wife's, whom Lish re-named "Myrna." The feel of the two stories is completely different. The longer version is confessional, fully told, easy to follow; the shorter version is jagged, elliptical, challenging the disoriented reader to fill in the blanks.

Kindred violence was done to Carver's exquisite story "A Small, Good Thing," in which a little boy named Scotty is hit by a car on his birthday and sinks into a coma in the hospital. As his parents struggle with breezy doctors and their own escalating panic, they begin receiving harassing phone calls from someone—a baker, it turns out, who wants payment for the cake he has baked for the boy. Eventually everything is sorted out. In a moving final scene, the baker urges the bereaved couple to eat something. "I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls," he says. "You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this." As they smell the newly baked bread, dawn is breaking. "They talked on into the early morning, the high pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving."

Mr. Fixit would have none of this comforting resolution, with its hints of communion and ecclesiastical high windows. Rewriting the story, Lish repeatedly referred to Scotty condescendingly and a little cruelly as "the birthday boy": "At an intersection, without looking, the birthday boy stepped off the curb, and was promptly knocked down by a car." A small change like this introduces that "note of disdain" that Irving Howe once complained of in Carver's stories. Lish hacked the story, renamed "The Bath," back to one of the menacing calls from the baker:

> "Yes!" she said. "Hello!" she said.
> "Mrs. Weiss," a man's voice said.
> "Yes," she said. "This is Mrs. Weiss. Is it about Scotty?" she said.
> "Scotty," the voice said. "It is about Scotty," the voice said. "It has to do with Scotty, yes."

If one were to summarize Lish's version of Carver, based on these and other examples, it would go something like this. Carver, like Hemingway, is a writer of radical concision, some of whose most suggestive effects come from repetition. Lish introduced additional repetitive patterns into Carver's stories, such as the often-mentioned "fellow in denim" who cheats at bingo in "After the Denim." In Carver's original version, the man isn't even wearing jeans. It is hardly surprising that Lish would rename Carver's story "Beginners"—a conversational symposium on the nature of love—with the repetitive title "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." Lish also purged Carver's stories of references to literature or other evidences of high culture; and he did his best to eliminate the persistent religious yearnings expressed in the stories, such as the prayer that ends the original version of "After the Denim."

Perhaps most importantly, Lish got rid of the feel of oral storytelling itself, the ways in which Carver's narrators circle around a story like a worried bird, trying, amid distractions and digressions, to get the full story told. Carver used

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the process to memorable comic effect in his early "Put Yourself in My Shoes," when a fatuous couple instructs a writer on the proper way to write a short story. "I'll go right to the climax, as you writers say," says the husband. One might argue that Mr. Fixit, like this bullying husband, misconstrued the nature of Carver's art. He thought that Carver was in the tradition of Hemingway, that he was a "minimalist" of some kind, an artist of radical abbreviation; in short, a writer of "short stories." Lish certainly "improved" Carver's stories by the standards of that tradition, giving them extra point, concision, suggestiveness, and climax.

But in fact, as we can now see from the original versions of his stories in this important Library of America volume, Carver was part of a different tradition altogether—the tradition of orally based storytellers such as Mark Twain and Sherwood Anderson. One could even argue that the abbreviations of the "short story," as taught at Iowa and elsewhere, are fundamentally opposed to the oral nature of the kind of storytelling that Carver was practicing. "Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated," Walter Benjamin declared in his famous essay "The Storyteller." "In point of fact, he has succeeded in abbreviating even storytelling. We have witnessed the evolution of the 'short story,' which has removed itself from oral tradition."

Twain and Anderson, along with Chekhov and Babel, were the writers Carver went to in times of trouble, the beacons he tried to steer his own wavering course by. During the summer of 1968, for example, the Carvers embarked on an ill-fated sojourn in Tel Aviv, funded by an academic fellowship that Maryann had won. Everything went wrong on the trip—disappointing accommodations, typewriter damaged in transit, overly sweet Israeli wines, and then, in the wake of the Six Day War, terrorist bombings in their neighborhood. Carver, as he recalled in a poem, tried to maintain perspective by reading *Life on the Mississippi*:

> I hang my legs further over the banister
> and lean back in shade,
> holding to the book like a wheel,
> sweating, fooling my life away,
> as some children haggle,
> then fiercely slap each other
> in the field below.

The story of Carver's final decade, as Sklenicka tells it, is one of reprieve, of release from the dependencies that had plagued his life. He stopped drinking in June 1977, after repeated warnings from doctors that liquor would kill him. His marriage ended the following year, and he began living with Gallagher in 1979. It was during this transitional period that he wrestled with Lish over the editing of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, and finally gave in on all the important points. With the publication of his next volume of stories, *Cathedral*, in 1983, he had broken this dependency as well. Not only was the ecstatic title story reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson (about whom Carver published an admiring essay the following year), but the religious valences of the story were unambiguous, as the narrator guides the blind man's hands over the flying buttresses and great doors of the cathedral that they are drawing together. The collection also included a restored version of "A Small, Good Thing." Carver, one is tempted to say, was saved.

And yet that stubborn sense of things unresolved will not go away. There is that measly five-thousand-dollar bequest to the members of the family left behind, and the concomitant human cost of Carver's eventual success as a writer. And there is the recalcitrant fact that we now have to deal with two Carvers. There is the historical Carver whose books, especially the epochal *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, as edited by Lish, are an ineradicable part of the evolution of American literature. And then there is the restored Carver, who writes in a different tradition altogether. Under ordinary circumstances, one could rule out this unpublished Carver, for books are made not just by writers, but also by editors and agents and publishers as well. Under ordinary circumstances, original intentions deserve as much respect in literature as in law. As Lish remarked acerbically, rhetorically, and, with an awkward passive, evasively: "Which has the greater value? The document as it issues from the writer or the thing of beauty that was made?"

But when you actually sit down and read the words that Carver originally wrote, all these convictions disappear into air. I cannot read "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit" ever again. "The art of storytelling is reaching its end," Benjamin wrote, "because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out." When Murakami remarked on "something penetrating and profound" in Carver's work, he was not referring to clever repetitions and oblique narrative disjunctions. He was talking about wisdom, the epic side of truth. It is Carver's hard-earned and vulnerable wisdom that we are hungry for, not the disdainful toughness that Mr. Fixit thrust into his gentle creations. It is increasingly clear that at this late date we are only at the very beginning of our understanding of this extraordinary storyteller. ◆

Andrew Butterfield
A RESPONDING SENSIBILITY

MEYER SCHAPIRO ABROAD: LETTERS TO LILLIAN AND TRAVEL NOTEBOOKS
Edited by Daniel Esterman
(Getty Research Institute,
243 pp., $39.95)

I.

Meyer Schapiro Abroad is an astonishing book. It consists of seemingly commonplace materials—the love letters that a graduate student wrote while traveling to work on his dissertation, plus a selection of sheets from his research notebooks. Yet taken together these pages present something extraordinary and nearly unique: an intensely evocative account of the process and the experience of historical discovery. As almost no other art historian or critic has ever done, Schapiro describes what it is like to deepen one's imaginative and emotional contact with the past, and to sharpen one's eye and focus one's mind on the material and visual culture of mankind. *Meyer Schapiro Abroad* is the autobiography of a great mind blossoming into maturity. Reading these pages, one can watch as the student transforms himself into the master.

Schapiro was twenty-two years old in 1926 when he left America to work on his doctoral dissertation. His thesis advisor at Columbia University had suggested that he study the twelfth-century sculptures of the Romanesque abbey at Moissac in southwest France, one of the first sites of the re-emergence of monumental statuary in Europe after the fall of the

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Roman Empire half a millennium earlier. Schapiro won a grant from the Carnegie Corporation to fund his trip, but he was not content to confine his travels to France and Spain, as the foundation expected. Over the course of sixteen months he traveled ceaselessly throughout Western Europe and the Middle East, concentrating chiefly on medieval art, but also investigating an astonishing array of other subjects, from prehistoric pottery to modern painting. Only someone of the boundless energy and endless curiosity of Meyer Schapiro would measure mosques in Cairo and photograph ruins in Baalbek as part of the study of an abbey in southern France.

The trip was the basis for much of Schapiro's later work. It provided him with the material for his first major study on modern art, as well as for the influential essays on medieval sculpture he produced over the next twenty years. Two sets of documents help us follow his journey. Eighteen of his research notebooks from the trip are preserved in the archive of Meyer Schapiro papers at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University. Some of the class notes that he made at university also survive, and they are fairly routine stuff—brief outlines of lectures, loose sketches of floor plans and façades, doodled portraits of his classmates and professors; they bear no clear mark of genius. But the drawings and records produced on his trip are distinguished by a completely different order of insight and observation.

Over and over again in these journals, he wrote to himself the imperatives "Look" and "Note"—and nearly every page gives abundant evidence of the urgency with which he pursued these commands. A talented artist—he had taken lessons in drawing and painting—Schapiro's usual way of analyzing a building, sculpture, or manuscript illumination was to draw it. The journals are full of precise and exquisite renderings in pen and ink, which he sometimes also shaded with pale wash. *Meyer Schapiro Abroad* reproduces, in excellent color illustrations, eighty sheets of sketches from his journals, and it also provides transcriptions of his often cryptic notes on these pages. But it does not explain that these sheets come from different notebooks, and it does not mention that there are hundreds more unpublished drawings in the archive at Columbia.

Schapiro's architectural sketches are especially commanding. He was able to capture the rhythm of a building's articulation of form and space, the sense of massing and order that it conveyed. Drawn freehand, without ruler or compass, the structures in his sketches appear majestic and yet full of energy and life. It is common praise to speak of a building as an organic whole, but few have succeeded as well as Schapiro in making an edifice seem like a living being. In his illustrations, structures do not simply stand and bear the load they carry. They thrust upward with surging vitality, like a dancer leaping or a plant unfurling. Schapiro often wrote that he felt like jumping with joy while examining a monument, and the buildings in his drawings seem to mirror this sense of affirmation and delight.

Schapiro was interested not only in the plan and the spirit of the works he studied. He also felt an intense concern for their details. With meticulous and loving regard, he investigated seemingly every particular of their articulation and ornament. He was captivated by the complexities of decoration, and sometimes he went bay by bay through a structure, recording its wealth of intricate moldings, figurated capitals, and lacy rinceaux. Surprisingly, Schapiro also measured many sculptures and buildings, often taking multiple readings and noting even the smallest discrepancies in the results. Such behavior might be routine for a team of archaeologists investigating a site, but it is quite exceptional in an art historian or a critic traveling alone.

The journals make clear that on this trip Schapiro was teaching himself how to see and how to think, and that he was amassing a vast and personal record of the monuments of the history of European art. Drawing was an act of analysis and memorization. In an unpublished manuscript, probably from the 1930s or 1940s, Schapiro wrote that "the historical study of art requires both the imaginativeness of the panoramic conception and the intimacy and detail of the study of the single object, trait, individual or school." In the notebooks we see him gaining panoramic knowledge through the attentive scrutiny of one work at a time, all over Europe and the Middle East. The sensitive description, the range of reference, and the intellectual exhilaration that distinguish his celebrated studies—both his works on medieval art, such as *The Sculptures of Souillac*, and his essays on modern art, such as "The Apples of Cézanne"—were habits of mind that he set out to acquire during his trip in 1926 and 1927.

The other records that document Schapiro's journey are the sixty-six letters that he wrote to his fiancée, Lillian Milgram, a young pediatrician. (They married shortly after his return to New York and lived together until Meyer's death in 1996. She died two years ago.) These letters, which make up most of the volume, form a perfect complement to the notebooks. Composed during the day, the journals are analytical, fragmentary, and utilitarian—the raw materials of and for intellectual labor. But the letters, written at night, are subjective, meditative, and emotional. In the notebooks, Schapiro discovers the art of the past; in the letters, he describes the joys of discovery.

In the letters Schapiro reflects often and at liberty on many topics in the study and the writing of history. But addressing his fiancée rather than a professional colleague, he avoids systematic discussion and routine academic subjects. Instead he seeks chiefly to convey to her the emotional and psychological experience of opening himself up, and of training his mind to understand what his eye is seeing. These are love letters, but of many loves: his love for Lillian, his love for art, his love for history. All these passions rush together in rhapsodic exultation.

The immediacy and the intimacy of his account of doing history are the source of much of the letters' interest. Certainly, these are qualities that separate them both from other reflections on historiography and from the published letters of other art historians. None of the letters of Jacob Burckhardt or Erwin Panofsky are so direct in their descriptions of the study of art or the past. Panofsky and Schapiro later became close friends, and they often wrote each other long and erudite letters about art history—but even in their correspondence neither master was ever as free in thought and expression as Schapiro was when writing to Lillian about his work in Europe and the Middle East.

To understand the themes that emerge in Meyer's letters, it helps to recall the outline of his recent education. Schapiro was the first graduate student ever at Columbia University in art history, which was then a relatively young discipline. There was no set program of study yet, and he was largely free to devise his own curriculum. Exasperated by the lack of imagination and rigor in the art history faculty, Schapiro took classes in an extraordinary range of other subjects, including logic and invertebrate biology, and studied at the Columbia School of Architecture (surely one reason for the exquisite quality of his architectural drawings). But the major influence on Schapiro at university was most likely

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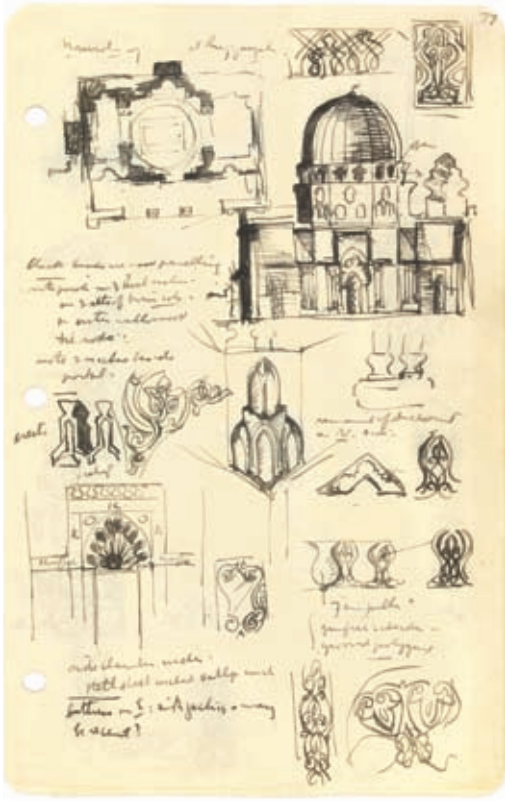
Franz Boas, the great anthropologist.

Boas's love of primitive art, his desire for a panoramic view of human culture, and his interest in the migrations and transformations of language and mythology were important for Schapiro, as was his belief that academic study should serve progressive and modern ideals. Boas was a charismatic teacher who attracted many rising stars: among his other brilliant students in the mid-'20s were Zora Neale Hurston, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead. (Mead was researching her dissertation, which became *Coming of Age in Samoa*, at the same time that Schapiro was working on his dissertation in Europe.) Moreover, Boas and his students often did fieldwork in remote places, and in primitive, even dangerous conditions. To accomplish their research required a measure of daring and determination more characteristic of explorers than scholastics. Although Schapiro was bound for Europe, not Samoa or Nunavut, he shared the same spirit of enterprise and adventure.

Schapiro writes of his journey as a voyage of exploration, a trip into the unknown. "I have concluded a happy voyage in which I have seen wonders," he tells Lillian from Paris, "and learned gaily & with passion." He never mentions the *Odyssey* by name, but themes found in Homer's epic make a regular appearance in the letters. Writing of his hope that his brother will share his experience, Schapiro says, "I always encourage him to cross the ocean, to learn languages, to move alone among new people & objects." These words recall the description of Odysseus at the start of the epic: "He saw the townlands and learned the minds of many distant men." On another occasion Schapiro declares, "But always the trouble [of travel] yields some interest & not merely interest, but experience that afterwards seems an indispensable destiny, always good to recall." Destiny, memory, the thirst for experience and knowledge—exactly the themes we find in Odysseus and the Sirens.

Like a hero on a quest, Schapiro faced true hardship and peril on his journey. The most direct correspondence with an event in the *Odyssey* occurred during Schapiro's trip from Naples to Port Said. Sailing through the Strait of Messina, his boat ran into a storm so ferocious that the passengers could not leave their bunks, and one traveler was killed. The Strait of Messina, as it happens, is traditionally identified as the site where Odysseus encountered Scylla and Charybdis, which made the seas so violent that some of his companions were washed overboard and drowned.

The similarities with the *Odyssey* may be coincidental, of course—but they point to something frequently overlooked about the researching and writing of history. Too many historians think of travel as useful rather than as essential. Study generally is a still, silent, and contemplative activity, carried out in museums, archives, and libraries; and getting to such faraway institutions, or to the sites and settings of the texts that are the subject of study, is often viewed as an unavoidable practical problem rather than as a crucial part of one's professional and intellectual formation. But not in Schapiro's case. His letters remind one of the truth of L. P. Hartley's famous observation that "the past is a foreign country." Traveling there should be like an act of pilgrimage that sharpens curiosity, and trains the mind, and stimulates the imagination.



Meyer Schapiro, Mausoleum of Al-Sayeda Ruqquyah, Cairo, 1927

Indeed, the importance of travel to writing history was made clear by two of the greatest historians who ever lived, Herodotus and Gibbon, and in ways that have a direct bearing on experiences that Schapiro reports. Herodotus, the first historian, was also one of the most celebrated voyagers in antiquity. More than once in the *Histories* he speaks of his lust to know what is over the horizon. He traveled to discover; and whenever, for some reason, he could not go on, he would make inquiries of locals to learn what lay beyond. In a similar manner, Schapiro on his journey was intensely stimulated by the exotic and the unknown. Writing from Damascus, for example, he reports:

> His Arab friends excited me enormously—for when they learned I was a student, they proceeded to tell me of strange monuments & unknown cities in the desert & beyond the Jebel Druse—I wrote down names & resolved to return to this region: And even more wonderful—I learned that with proper credentials, I could apply to the military commandant at Damascus, & obtain from him a Bedouin, who would guide me, (likewise in Bedouin dress) throughout the farther country.

Twenty-five hundred years after Herodotus, Schapiro trekked through many of the same lands, aflame with the same desire.

The act of travel can also be a source of inspiration. Clio, the goddess of history, is a muse, and so must be invoked, and this is best done on site, in one of her precincts. Thus, Gibbon in his memoirs speaks of the importance of travel in his discovery of purpose. In an account of "the benefits of travel" he remarks: "Yet the historian of the decline and fall must not regret his time or expense, since it was the view of Italy and Rome which determined the choice of the subject. In my Journal the place and moment of conception are recorded; the fifteenth of October 1763, in close of evening, as I sat musing in the Church of the Zoccolanti or Franciscan friars, while they were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter on the ruins of the Capitol." And a few days after his arrival in France, Schapiro had a similar experience of reverie and inspiration. He tells Lillian:

> I foresaw nothing of these days. Even the architecture is new, beside the few bare details we had learned at school. To walk in and out of a cathedral, to follow the vaulting from below & to trace its ribs, supports, & buttressing from all sides, to climb the towers & pass thru the triforium openings & galleries & to discover the adjustment of parts everywhere, and the variation from bay to bay, & column to column, & to see the whole

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in space with such liberty of movement that I seem to learn at each step—it is an awful sentence to finish, dear—but these things quite fill me & I easily lose myself in amazement & then fall into reverie which descends to melancholy historical retrospection & I awaken to a beautiful tolling in the lantern which tells me to draw & take notes.

II.

Schapiro often writes Lillian of the importance of reverie in the development of his historical vision and knowledge. When he speaks of dreaming, he is attempting to describe a complex state of mind, with three elements: experiential, emotional, and intellectual. Before his trip, the historical past had been for Schapiro chiefly an imaginary domain, which he could only glimpse dimly through lectures, books, and the handful of remains cast up at the Metropolitan and other American museums. But on his journey in Europe and the Middle East he could physically enter the realm of the past, and know that it was actual and living. The sensory experience of the buildings and monuments he explored—their scale, their physicality, their beauty—was beyond all expectations. And what had been imaginary not only turned out to be real, it also had a heightened intensity and a supercharged presence far unlike anything he had experienced before: it was dreamlike in its beauty and its force. Schapiro uses the word "dream" in his letters also to characterize his response to this encounter, to describe both the wonder he felt and the unleashing of his mind to think freely about what he was observing.

His fullest account of this experience is in an unforgettable letter from León, in Spain, in 1927 near the end of his trip. It is too long to quote in full, but even a few sentences will give a sense of its power:

> I walked late this afternoon to the cathedral, which is beautiful, & took me from this vexatious business—I think the earlier preoccupations were good, since they left me in a mood in which the architecture was wonderfully relaxing or quieting—There was no desire to know—or to study; & every detail had some charm for me: & I noticed what usually escapes me. The air of the interior, the quality of the space, the darkness & half-shadow, the scale of the few others in the building, beside the rising shafts. … There was a happy collusion of my mood (reduced to innocence by fatigue & the thoughts of the past few days) with the objects about me. I was practically alone with them. The statues & pictures & capitals & windows were in an immense space, limited & undefinable—all mine, in shadow & light … I thought that nothing could be happier than to give oneself completely to these objects, to study them minutely, know every detail—living whole years with them—There would be no method—no school of thought—no simple approach which criticized the others—Besides the perfection of craftsmanship & thought, the peculiarities of individual minds—the possible moods in which a man 300 years ago made the Virgin look proudly at the angel Gabriel—as an amply gowned Roman matron; & another 400 years earlier, attenuated all figures & gave them sorrowful staccato gestures—& another, a little before, carved Adam, Eve, Christ, Lazarus, Moses, angels, devils, as fat goitrous smiling people—these moods too must be recreated, to prolong the day dream that accompanies love of the work.… I wished also to carve & paint … And I wish also a hundred thousand other things—all because of this voyage. I know I shall soon be with you, darling.

The richness of such an experience imbued Schapiro with a strong sense of the contrast between the living power of art and the dull and formulaic character of most art history and criticism. In many of his letters to Lillian, he speaks of the conventionality and the falsity of what he had studied in school. He criticizes the "general and verbal manner" of his earlier learning, and observes that "the ordinary inspection [of a work of art]—which is simply an identifying of things already learned—is a great fraud." He compares the academic style of understanding, with its emphasis on repetition and rhetoric, with the new method that he is discovering during his journey, a method that is at the same time more empirical, and more imaginative and open-minded. "This is a pleasant town to dream in," he writes from Florence. "It is so joyful to stand before Donatello or Brunelleschi—even in the most melancholy mood—if only the thoughts consequent to such perfection are allowed to ramble, to thicken, to move." And in one of the most illuminating passages on the value of the trip for his intellectual development, he writes that

> My mind feels differently & thinks in other ways about matters that had occupied me long before; but it has happened unconsciously, as if I have acquired a new craft—And it is a craft—for the great part of the journey's experience was in learning by touching, seeing & moving about objects—school now seems strangely passive or another habit with other ends. I love architecture all the more. May we make this same journey many times together, sweetheart.

The conviction that art history and criticism were often tendentious and too abstract remained with Schapiro throughout his career. As a writer, scholar, and teacher he sought to avoid pre-conceived schemata of interpretation, and instead to concentrate on the actual experience of looking at the work of art.

Joy is another fundamental theme in Meyer's letters to Lillian. In his initial note to her after his arrival in Moissac, he writes about looking at the sculptures there: "To be with them is to be happy indeed. And to study their details is to live in perpetual discovery and pride." Upon first studying the illuminations from the monastery, he reports to her that "the manuscripts from Moissac are so rich & fruitful, that I jump with every new volume." Visiting the city of Poitiers, he exults that "archaeologically there are problems here for generations, artistically, joys forever."

Such comments were not merely the unfettered expressions of youthful enthusiasm. Schapiro believed that the making and study of art were deeply serious and nearly sacred acts, but he also believed that art was intended to bring pleasure, joy, fulfillment. In a letter to Panofsky in 1953, he expressed his concern over the decline in the quality of young scholars, and added this: "But I think that besides the limitations on research imposed by teaching duties, there is also a lack of confidence that people in our field have in scholarship. They have not tasted its joys, but only its assigned routines." And in an unpublished set of notes on teaching at university level, written probably in the 1940s or 1950s, Schapiro worried that art history "tends to substitute acquaintance with facts about art, for experience of art; it emphasizes classification, names, dates, historical relationships, at expense of understanding and perception and growth of power of enjoyment."

Schapiro's strongest statement of the life-affirming pleasure he experienced on the trip comes in a letter he wrote to Lillian at two o'clock in the morning after an extraordinary day near the end of his journey. He had spent the morning in Madrid at the Prado, then traveled in the afternoon to Toledo to examine

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its architecture and El Greco, and finally moved on to Segovia to spend the night. As he composes the letter, he is high on the coffee he has been drinking for hours, and on everything he saw that day. He jumps from subject to subject, in a joyful rush of images, too impatient to complete sentences or to follow the rules of regular grammar. It is one of the longest letters he wrote while in Europe, and perhaps the hardest to characterize or quote from, given its interweaving of references and its sudden shifts of tone and subject. Here I can give only an idea of the text:

> On the train, I was in great joy—to be going once more … Small stretches of the trip excited me as bits of El Greco & Titian this morning in the Prado—I think of the evening coolness, and the one cloud, the still faint crescent moon over a world that was all below me, receding in one place, alternately fertile & populous and arid desert—were the very opposite of Madrid, where I only saw tall houses and an endless stream of people in cafés & shops & narrow streets & driven by the heat—But when I entered Segovia I rode into the town square—which was again a small Madrid; a band play—; under the arcades and out into the square cafés and seated crowds; and children dancing & as much animation as in a city ten times the size of this—Here I was delighted: I had no sooner found a room than I ran down to the square & walked about, finally sat down, & drank coffee till midnight (Hooray! I have found some ink!) … The Mozarab church of S. Cristo de la Luz kept me several hours—for it has a great variety of construction: & a most beautiful south wall. From the photos I had judged it a large building—It is tiny. The exterior arcades are proportioned to effect an endless movement & variety. One half of the building is pure Arab—the other mixed, Roman, and Byzantine & Persian—I wandered around the walls of Toledo, thru the old gates—which are a great thrill to me, & show that the Moors could also mass, & work finely with voluminous towers and walls. In one church I jumped to see apsidal fenestration identical with that of the Pantokrator in Constantinople—the street was no different from the oriental— … Later, near the Alcantara bridge was another view equally exciting—without warning, mountains rose from a plain: the river turned twice; & on high rocks—gloomy & jagged, stood the city—El Greco painted this—his finest landscape—I [went] to his house, once the home of Simon Levi—furnished with Moorish & Christian fittings—Next to it in the Greco Museum were 20 of his pictures—but not the very best … The best of El Greco is in the Prado, beside Titian & Rubens—I thought to cry out with joy at some pieces—You should have been there: & I would have kissed you wildly instead: & my meaning would have been clear—I did not know what to look at—or why to stand & gaze—what to think.… It is two AM. All the church bells of Segovia are now playing.

This is a form of ecstasy. In its excited celebration of movement, art, and experience, the letter is almost like something by one of the Beats; and it is worth remembering that later, as a professor at Columbia, Schapiro taught and encouraged many writers and artists of Dionysian temperament, including Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Allan Kaprow.

III.

By allowing us to watch him at work, *Meyer Schapiro Abroad* helps to reveal some of the motivating principles at the heart of Schapiro's own scholarship. He believed that art historians and critics should strive to exemplify three ideals: "objective attitude," "responding sensibility," and "immense receptivity." I have drawn these phrases from his study "On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art," from 1947, where he uses them to describe the ideals of some medieval writers he admired; and I will use some of his language in that essay to show what he intended by these terms and how they can be applied to his own work.

For Schapiro, "objective attitude" meant an "exactness in describing" a work of art. He sought to apply this standard both to an accounting of its physical attributes as well as to the judgment of its aesthetic characteristics. It denoted the desire for completeness and accuracy in measurement—how big a work is, how many parts it is made of, and similar questions; but it also pertained to questions of a higher order of analysis and interpretation, to "the effort to read the forms and colors and to weight their effects." The aspiration for truth is not merely an intellectual principle, it is also a moral one; and for Schapiro it was the supreme obligation of any historian. It is noteworthy how often throughout his career Schapiro was stirred to publish critiques of critics, philosophers, and historians—Berenson, Freud, Heidegger—when in his view they failed in this duty, especially when he believed that vanity, arrogance, or self-dealing contributed to the failure.

Yet Schapiro did not think that objective description and accurate analysis alone were sufficient for the history and the criticism of art. Art is made to create an experience, and if one ignores its experiential nature—its lived power—one is denying or distorting its essence. Hence he believed that it was necessary for the historian to bear a "responding sensibility," and to "convey the spectator's excitement and fascination as an experience of its own kind, sometimes so intense as to recall descriptions of religious ecstasy." The critic or historian should seek to understand and call attention to what was striking, moving, or inspiring in a work of art. Schapiro was an unembarrassed—more, a principled—enthusiast, and he wanted others to share in the joy of insight that he felt when studying a picture, a sculpture, or a building.

By "immense receptivity," he meant "curiosity about" and "readiness to admire" the art of new or foreign cultures, beyond native traditions and inherited expectations. Throughout his career, Schapiro shied away from the study of art that was generally regarded as classical, naturalistic, or normative. The only periods in the history of Western art he almost never wrote about were Greco-Roman antiquity and Renaissance Europe. Instead he was attracted to periods and styles that could be celebrated as new eruptions of energy, whether in the archaic, medieval, or modern eras.

Schapiro distrusted any effort to reduce cultural or intellectual activity to the reception of established opinions and settled practices. In aesthetics, likewise, he believed it was only by continual exposure to little-known, exotic, and primitive styles, and by a real effort to understand the motives behind such unfamiliar modes of creation, that one could challenge and refresh one's own assumptions. And even then we might fail to do justice to the art of other times and cultures. He worried that "our immense liberality toward the most varied styles, and our eagerness to enlarge the aesthetic horizon, do not exclude a certain narrowness and arrogant partisanship in taste." He sought to achieve a panoramic vision of human achievement; and although he recognized that it was optimistic or even naïve to do so, he hoped that the visual arts could serve as a vehicle of mutual understanding for people around the world.

Before taking up art history, Schapiro had considered becoming a painter, an

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architect, or an anthropologist; and his training as an artist and an ethnographer gave him a perception of culture different from the typical view of most academics. The writing of cultural history is often characterized by a desire for stability and order. It tends to be retrospective, to look back to a Golden Age and an ideal setting, such as Raphael's Rome or Manet's Paris. The nostalgia in this point of regard is increased by the monastic traditions of the professoriate. Many historians spend their entire working lives within the protective walls of the academic cloister; and like medieval scribes, they see their work as primarily dedicated to the preservation of special monuments and sacred texts. Culture, for them, is made up of forms to be saved, copied, and imitated.

But there is another approach to cultural history, one that acknowledges that it is ceaselessly dynamic and endlessly changeful. This view emphasizes the migration of peoples, the exchange of goods, the transformation of traditions and symbols. It draws on the experience of the traveler in the world, rather than on that of the priest in the sanctuary. It looks outward and over the horizon, rather than only inward and back; it thinks in terms of the map rather than the holy book and the sacred totem. In this understanding, history is made up of a multi-nodal network in which there is a constant, unstoppable flow of energy—persons and things and ideas and images and practices; and the weight and the importance of the many nodes is always shifting. There is no Golden Age, no Caput Mundi, because there are so many.

Schapiro exemplified this second approach. Before he became a historian, he worked with Boas, who taught that "all cultural forms appear in a constant state of flux." Human culture has no one center, no single ideal manifestation; it never has and it never will. All is variation and movement; and each part must be studied in relation to the others. This synoptic and comparative view is very different from the Hegelian linearity that underlies so much of the writing of cultural history. Boas lectured about these differences and believed that historians should learn from the anthropological standpoint.

Both at the time of his dissertation and later in his career, Schapiro traveled widely to acquire a map in his head of the culture of the world, and he remained fascinated by the mutation of styles and symbols and iconographies across large expanses of time and space. He grasped connections between places and cultures that others viewed as disparate: Baalbek and Moissac, Constantinople and Toledo. Unlike most art historians who work only on one place and one time, Schapiro worked on many and believed that art history should seek to understand "the whole of known history in panoramic extension and relatedness." He did not admire the cloistered sacredness of medieval art, as others did; he argued instead that Romanesque sculpture was a form of discourse with the world at large. Similarly, he believed that academic study and teaching should thrive in its contribution to public discussion. Schapiro stressed that the experience of modern artists helped us to achieve a new understanding of culture, one in which "the accomplishment of the past ceases to be a closed tradition of noble content or absolute perfection." Instead it is "a model of individuality, of history-making effort through continual self-transformation." The effort, creativity, and independence of earlier genius, not the external forms of its products, are what we should emulate.

Schapiro was the most celebrated teacher of art history of his generation in America. Yet the example that he provides is perhaps even more urgent today. In art history now, "objective attitude" and "responding sensibility" are typically viewed as contradictions. Historians of empiricist inclination tend to look with severe distrust at the subjective components of aesthetic judgment, while those drawn more to interpretation often slip into the solipsisms of high theory. The results of this conflict are paralysis and sterility. Moreover, for all the talk of interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism, the profession is increasingly narrow-minded and presentist in attitude. Whole continents and many millennia are routinely overlooked. There are extremely few academic or museum positions in Indian, African, pre-Columbian, ancient Near Eastern, Southeast Asian, Oceanic, or pre-historic art, and even those for classical, medieval, and Renaissance art are in sharp decline; but every institution seems to have someone working on the status-conferring art of the last fifty years in America and Europe. The "arrogant partisanship of taste" and "the general and verbal manner" and "assigned routines" of scholarship that troubled Schapiro long ago are even more prevalent in art history now. Anyone today seeking to imagine afresh the possibilities of the discipline, and to give it new energy, would do well to look to the example of his universal range and his rigorous joy. ◆

David Thomson
THE MOGUL EMPIRE

IRVING THALBERG: BOY WONDER TO PRODUCER PRINCE
By Mark A. Vieira
(University of California Press, 504 pp., $34.95)

THERE ARE TIMES of such chaos and promise, danger and daydream, when all of us hope for a superb and flawless leader. If he can swing it, we are off the hook. But he need not be a hero who turns into a tyrant. He is not necessarily strong, fierce, and Herculean. Indeed, it may add to his charm, to his magic, if he is slight, youthful, on the pretty side, and—better still—dying. He should be gentler than other leaders, more reliant on reason, calm, and explanation than those commanders who insist on being obeyed. In modern times, I can think of three such figures—Michael Corleone (Ivy League, good military record, the clean boy in the family), Irving Thalberg (the sickly genius who led Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in its great days), and Barack Obama, the once-marginal man who was so wise and so far-seeing that he believed he did not have to behave like an American politician to save America.

There is something religious in the way Irving Grant Thalberg appeared at the right moment—on May 30, 1899, just in time for the new age and its sensational light show. He was the son of a melancholy father, William Thalberg, German-Jewish, from near Coblenz, an importer of lace but such a failure that he had to rent a multi-room attic in Brooklyn. The mother, Henrietta Heyman, was made of sterner stuff. As one who knew her put it, "Rather unlovely physically, she was imbued with the American dream of wealth, success, and social status." Her family was in the department store business, and she was determined that Irving was going to defy every doctor's warning that he was frail, a

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likely invalid, with a heart problem. Since it was the general estimate that the boy would not live to see thirty, his mother decided that he had no time for college.

She did much more. She nursed him. She kept him in bed whenever infection was in the neighborhood. She talked to him, gazed upon him, and urged her ambition and her desire for knowledge into his slender frame. Irving was never more than five-foot-six and 122 pounds. He had padded shoulders put in his suits. But he was angelic—this book uses his face on the jacket as if he were a romantic star. He read widely; he studied languages and shorthand; he absorbed philosophy and fiction, and he began to develop not just an analytical mind but also a rigorously pragmatic attitude to life. He resolved to be effective. He never seems to have been inspired to write stories himself, but he could take a story, deconstruct it, and improve it—as if it was a bicycle or an automobile.

By the time he was eighteen, he was beautiful: dark wavy hair, large, sympathetic pools for eyes, a wide brow, and a maturity in the way of human empathy. Older people with more worldly success encountered him and were not just impressed; they were also calmed and reassured, and they waited for him to suggest what they might do. In 1919 he got a job as secretary to Carl Laemmle, the head of Universal Pictures. The movies were still an infant form, noisy, lawless, crazed, and largely improvised by gamblers, gangsters, and would-be artists. As a business it was clearly the new rage—there were fortunes to be made and stolen. As an art, it might have the power to usurp literature itself, for here were stories for those who could not read. But the whole thing was in the hands of uneducated escapees from Eastern Europe and the rag trade, people who had blundered into the new business of nickelodeon arcades and "theaters," and wondered what films they could show.

Used to being in bed and examining the evidence, Thalberg revealed an astonishing way of making decisions. His lack of credentials or physical heft meant very little when he could play with the idea for a film as if it was a coin, tossing it and turning it until he knew "heads" from "tails." Whether it was a trick or a lucky way of seeing things, all he had to do was call it as if he were right. It led to astonishing promotion. Just twenty, he was put in charge of production at Universal Studios. He stood up to Erich von Stroheim (the spirit of the Hun, the man you love to hate) and actually fired him from his film *Merry-Go-Round*, because Stroheim was going recklessly over budget and schedule. At twenty-two, Thalberg was invited to join the company of Louis B. Mayer, and two years later, when Mayer rose in the merger of M, G, and M, Thalberg became head of production at the new outfit. He was not quite twenty-five, the age at which Orson Welles got to make *Citizen Kane*. There might be a fascinating argument as to which of them was the more precocious—but Welles looked as strong as a bull (and as dangerous), while Thalberg was everyone's idea of a weakling. When Mayer studied his own production head, he dreamed for a moment that Irving might be a perfect match for one of his daughters. But then he sighed, recollecting the common wisdom that the kid wouldn't see past thirty.

Well, Thalberg lasted until September 1936. There had been heart attacks earlier in the '30s, and convalescences that kept him away from his studio, but he made it through the worst years of the Depression. Then he got a chill in Monterey, revisiting the site of his honeymoon, and he never recovered. His fragile heart had over the years worked the longest days in town and treated pressure with a faint, superior smile. He had married Norma Shearer, despite some earlier fears that he might not be able to sustain sexual intercourse (not the worst cover for womanizers in that harem community), and had two children. One of his last remarks was to inquire about the latest grosses on *Romeo and Juliet*.

About that film, the answers were disappointing: *Romeo and Juliet* was a forlorn swan song with the lovers Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer, who were thirty-nine and thirty-six. It hardly mattered. Thalberg (and Mayer) had guided MGM through steady years of profit and distinction. After the coming of sound in 1927, Thalberg's position was eroded by illness and by political rivalries within the studio. But his reputation had not suffered. His death was regarded as an irreplaceable loss, and there were those who predicted the downfall of MGM, as well as the loss of taste and artistic daring at that studio. The truth, I think, is far more complicated. But the truth is a very difficult thing to establish in the case of Irving Thalberg.

It is seventy-three years since the man died, after a career in which he took pains to keep his name off the product. He was modest, or he was confident. We know there were certain films that he cared about. We know the reputation—that Thalberg could sit in a script conference and make the one suggestion that made the project cohere; or that he could look at an untidy cut and propose a few minutes out here and a few minutes in there—and suddenly the show was streamlined. Alas, a biographer has a hard time finding such moments or decisions, making the legend live. So it's all the more tempting to go to *The Last Tycoon*, the unfinished novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald that has muddled the reality of Thalberg.

Even in its broken state, *The Last Tycoon* is among the best books half-written about Hollywood. Its protagonist, Monroe Stahr, is someone very like Irving Thalberg: intelligent, cool, in charge of production, and attempting to balance profit and adventure in the studio's program. Fitzgerald knew Thalberg—he had been hired and fired by him, and had been a guest at the Thalberg home. Above all, Stahr is the antithesis of the other widespread legend—of the crude showmen who could hardly read and write, who veered between crying and bullying. But it is important to remember that Stahr is a fiction, and it is quite possible to suppose that the character owed as much to Darryl Zanuck, David O. Selznick, or Hal Wallis, considerable mogul figures in their own right.

What makes the Stahr-Thalberg equation so clinching is the stress on Stahr as a manager. By far the best thing in *The Last Tycoon* is an account of a day in Stahr's life that follows him around the lot solving one problem after another. That is the passage where he tries to teach Boxley, a stuffy English novelist, about the way movie stories work. So Stahr makes up a hook for Boxley until the grudging novelist asks, "What happens next?" The point, of course, is that this is the essential dramatic and literary dynamic of the movies, the question that keeps you in your seat.

There have been books in this area before. In 1975, Samuel Marx (an assistant to Thalberg) published *Mayer and Thalberg*, which is still the source of most of the stories and the facts, and which grasps

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the duality that ran the studio. After all, Mayer hired Thalberg in the first place. He always earned more (and Thalberg was anxious about money). He was neither as educated nor as articulate as Thalberg. Their minds did not work in the same way. Mayer became jealous of Thalberg, but he clearly loved and worshipped him, too. Alas, we have virtually no paper record of how they worked together, in great part because they did most of their work talking. Or leaving anecdotes behind.

Mayer could be a bully and a beast. He was intimidating as a father, and very cunning in business. He was said to be the best and most chronic actor at that studio of stars. Thalberg, by contrast, flinched from showiness, melodrama, and acting out. There is a lovely story told by Marx. Thalberg's first child has just been born. Irving drives back to the studio from the hospital, and a gang of employees is waiting to greet and to congratulate him. "How is the boy?" the question goes. To which Thalberg replies, "The doctors say he has the brains of a three-week-old baby!" It's a whimsical remark from a man always being praised by others for his smarts yet wise enough to realize how little he knew—a Cary Grant line, if you know what I mean. Which suggests that very likely half the crowd waiting didn't get the joke in 1930.

Mark Vieira writes with great verve and enthusiasm, and he has a flair for narrative movement that suits these exponents of the new storytelling. He has researched far and wide, which means that he has been able to use the notes kept by Bob Thomas, who wrote the first Thalberg biography in 1969, as well as the draft of an unpublished memoir by Norma Shearer. He says he has been on the book eighteen years, but a lot of the sources go much further back. And some are hard to account for: in dealing with *Greed*, for example, the von Stroheim movie begun at Goldwyn but finally Thalberg's problem, because of the merger, Vieira says that as the studio removed the film from von Stroheim, it was cut down by Joe Farnham and Howard Hawks. This may be so, but the source notes to this book do not provide a basis for the claim, and Todd McCarthy's very thorough biography of Hawks seems unaware of the possibility.

That is a small but fascinating surprise. On the other hand, there are omissions in Vieira's book that are startling. All along, there was a wary but respectful relationship between Thalberg and David Selznick, no matter that Selznick was Mayer's son-in-law and a candidate for replacing Thalberg. The men might have been natural enemies. But a friendship developed, and nothing proves this more than the fact that, when Selznick formed his independent company with Jock Whitney (the company that would make *Gone with the Wind*), both Thalberg and Norma Shearer became shareholders in the company, at $100,000 each. This fact is fairly well known, and important, but Vieira never mentions it.

The hardest thing of all to track in this story is the daily relationship between Mayer and Thalberg. Were they good cop and bad cop? Did they realize how far each played off the other to create his own status at the studio? Consider the invention of Greta Garbo. It was Mayer who "discovered" Garbo. On a famous family trip to Europe, he identified the Swedish director Mauritz Stiller as a likely talent for Hollywood, so he hired him and then added Garbo to the deal. Then, at Culver City, it was Thalberg who fell out with the sophisticated Stiller and instead developed the star image of Garbo. But it was Mayer who secretly negotiated a new contract whereby she got profit participation (one of the first such deals). Was this smoothly handled, or was it a story of constant interference and jealousy? Granted their natures, Mayer was the more likely to become angry and envious. So maybe the conflict that came was inevitable. And yet they were a team—and it was together that they saved and rehabilitated *Ben-Hur* (the first version) so that it became one of MGM's most celebrated spectacles.

You had to be there, perhaps, taking daily notes. And no one did, except Fitzgerald, who then made it up. The paperwork from MGM was trashed a long time ago, before the studio perceived that it might have value. So Vieira's book raises many questions about exact proceedings—and I wish there were more thorough notes. Still, it is an excellent narrative of those years, well written and extensively researched.

What did Thalberg achieve? Well, the short answer is that as a manager he identified and laid down a factory system, based on contract participation, so that writers, cameramen, sound stages, and editing rooms were employed as steadily as actors and actresses. He preferred efficiency in a creative world where confusion, jealousy, and bad planning could ruin everything. (This meant that once you started a picture, you could not throw it out and start again—though that is bad for masterpieces.) And for twelve years, from 1924 until Thalberg's death, his studio grew, stayed profitable, and employed some of the great names of motion pictures. He also supervised a business system in which the profits went to Loew's (the parent company and the distribution arm) and not to the participants—and it was that changeover that would throttle the movies. He beat back the advances of the trade unions. He kept the stars confined to acting, though he paid them fabulously well.

Was Thalberg a genius? Well, Vieira has him announcing that sound would be just "a fad." Wrong. Yet a little later, with justice, Vieira sees that Thalberg had recognized how far sound had transformed and accelerated the naturalism of all films, and the human depth that it permitted. Brilliant—and the soil for Thalberg's knack of coming up with a line that bloomed as it was spoken. So he made the studio's program work as no one else ever did, and he came out of it all heroic, saintly, self-sacrificial, a lot richer, and leaving Louis B. Mayer as the repository for all the vulgar stories about uncouth Hollywood moguls.

In his epilogue, Vieira tries to make a final assessment. He points to *Marie Antoinette* and *Love Finds*

The Talker

The details of his story aren't the point,
nor is the listener, who looked as bored
as we, two accidental eavesdroppers
in a London restaurant. The point is, well,
his point, which after ten long minutes
he came to abruptly, and with a flourish,
saying slowly and in perfect seriousness,
"All we are is dust in the wind. *All*
we are. Is dust. In the wind." I think
we bit our fingers to keep from laughing,
I know we mocked him through Paris, Barcelona,
Rome, and even years later, when one
of us became a little too serious,
the other would turn and quote his quote again,
jabbing the air as he had jabbed the air.
I picture him still sitting in some café,
proclaiming we were always born to run
or urging wayward sons to carry on
the way we tried to carry on, the couple
at the next table who couldn't help but listen,
with so little of our own to talk about.

CHELSEA RATHBURN

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Andy Hardy, both from 1938, as exemplary of Thalberg's studio and Mayer's. *Marie Antoinette* was a vehicle for Norma Shearer, a wish honored after Thalberg's death, and *Love Finds Andy Hardy* was a cookie-cutter staple full of righteous sentiment and shallow exuberance. He then leaves us to conclude that one system took over from another: "After Thalberg's death, Mayer brought M-G-M ten supremely prosperous years, but the studio's output became predictable. The thoughtful, quirky, innovative cinema of Irving Thalberg died with him."

With respect, I think that's nonsense, and a misreading of what Thalberg achieved. *Marie Antoinette* is a bad stately film, ponderous with production values in the manner of *Romeo and Juliet*, and fatally short on vitality or energy. Its stars are too mature to be wild kids—and it may be that, resting so much, Irving had lost his own youth. *Romeo and Juliet* lost nearly $1 million. *Marie Antoinette* lost half that amount. You can argue that Thalberg had succumbed at the end to sentimentality or "class," but sumptuous respectability—dullness—is the real enemy. And there is dullness aplenty in the Thalberg oeuvre.

With the best will in the world, if asked to pick the films from Thalberg's MGM that have lasted best, I would list King Vidor's *The Big Parade* (the first smash hit for MGM); Garbo in *The Temptress*, *Love*, and *Flesh and the Devil*; *The Crowd*; *The Wind*; *The Unholy Three*; *Freaks* (a real departure, not explained in this book or any other); *Mutiny on the Bounty* (if you can see it without singing along); *A Night at the Opera*; and *Camille*. I would have to add that Thalberg did damage by taking the Marx Brothers out of their Paramount era and taming their movies with love stories and songs. Although his studio functioned better than any other, its record of individual films is not that impressive, or lasting. The MGM record certainly does not challenge that of Warners or Paramount.

On the other hand, if you reckon that the era of Mayer on his own began only in 1938 (and lasted until his firing in 1951), then this is the record: *Ninotchka*; *The Wizard of Oz*; *The Philadelphia Story*; *The Shop Around the Corner*; *Woman of the Year*; *Mrs. Miniver*; *An American Romance*; *Gaslight*; *Meet Me in St. Louis*; *The Clock*; *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; *Act of Violence*; *Adam's Rib*; *On the Town*; *The Asphalt Jungle*; *An American in Paris*. I don't mean to say that Mayer "made" all those pictures or chose them. But MGM after Thalberg is far from a wasteland of conformity.

Incidentally, I omitted *Gone with the Wind* from the Mayer list, because it was a Selznick project on which Mayer won the distribution rights in a very shrewd but fiercely family deal. In fact, *Gone with the Wind* kept MGM prosperous for years, and it was only because Selznick, having made that epic, turned out to be a disastrous and emotional businessman, of the sort that would have made Thalberg wince. In the end, Selznick had a desperate need to express himself, to be glorious. Thalberg was completely immune to all that. And he had a kind of instinctive common sense that might have helped Selznick live longer and be far more productive. (Ironically, Selznick was married to a Thalberg. His wife Irene—quoted as much as anyone in Vieira's book—was Louis B. Mayer's daughter, but her blood ran as cool and steady as Irving's. For a few years she kept her David under some kind of control, but then he went astray, with drugs, gambling, neurotic mania, and the insane urge to better *Gone with the Wind*.)

So why does Thalberg's legend endure? The reasons are many. There is *The Last Tycoon*; and the neat and tidy way in which MGM became an emblem of Hollywood; and the intriguing smile on his watchful face. But basically his legend is owed to our longing for people like him—for managers with oddly clean hands, for effective compromisers who betray very little that matters. The latest research makes it quite clear that successful multi-tasking—the essence of Stahr and Thalberg and of our political leaders—is wishful thinking. That mounting panic we all know—"I'm being asked to do too much"—is absolutely confirmed by the scientific evidence. We have our limits. We need to concentrate. No one has the superior ability to be in charge of everything. Yet wise men are elected to the presidency, say, and given a lunatic power of decision over a vast range of issues.

Is it possible, then, that Thalberg blundered around the studio, getting some things right (Garbo) and others wrong (sound)? Was his saving grace the knowledge that all he had to do to command respect was to take every decision decisively, as if to quell any threat of confusion? So he gambled, and trusted that people would remember his wins and forgive his failures? In fact, Thalberg was better than that. He knew that to run the studio he needed a corps of producers and executives that he had trained, and who shared his broad attitudes. At MGM, he enlisted such people—Paul Bern was one of them (the husband found dead in Jean Harlow's house—nobody's perfect), Bernard Hyman, Albert Lewin, Hunt Stromberg, David Lewis, and some others. He delegated, and he seems to have trusted the delegates. The greatest insanity is to delegate and then second-guess those people—which is how Selznick made *Gone with the Wind*, perhaps the signal achievement of Hollywood the madhouse.

We do not have studios any longer. They have been followed by networks or operations called NBC, CBS, ABC, and even HBO. Talent counts at those places, if the people in charge are willing to trust the talent they have hired. And, generally speaking, those businesses—network TV or cable—can thrive for that great first run when the game is new. That's what saved MGM: the fact that from 1924 to 1951 it wasn't terribly difficult to do well making movies. You had the audience, you see. They would watch anything. HBO faces the same glory now and I'm sure it has been led by smart people, or by people who believe in trusting the talent that conceives and produces creative work.

In other fields—in politics, for instance—moguls do less well (unless they have armies at their call and wars that can be set in motion). You can call it our spirit of democracy, or the vain hope of idiots, but how is it that we continue to believe that one person can effectively multi-task all that? The answer is that the person must be so unlike us, so removed, so alien, that we may believe he has magical powers. Otherwise it is very hard not to notice that the wheelchair is running downhill at mounting speed. And uninsured.

Making movies and struggling with the future are not the same. But they may pose the same dilemma as between common sense and craziness. Thalberg wanted the movies to be a sensible business, and he came close. But he coincided with the apogee of the form, when nothing could keep the public away. It was also a deranged thing to do—this shaping of a movie, let alone the plan to make a lifetime business out of it. Of course, movie-making is a voluntary process, whereas somebody has to be president. For much of the time, alas, our experience suggests it hardly matters who. Idiots complete their term the same as noblemen. But it may be up to us to whisper to an Irving to get his hands dirty, to go for broke and make *Freaks* or cast his wife as Juliet. Never kid yourself that it's all under control. ◆

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Washington Diarist

Into Reverse

The search for sublimity in the city is one of the most traditional quests of modernity. Urban life is a sacrifice of nature for culture, but it is not obvious that culture can provide the same exaltations as nature. When I saw Manhattan from 17,000 feet a few days ago, it looked like a folly, a vast vain pile of blocks and cubes into which the air and the light seemed to disappear. In the city, the question of being (I'm dating myself here) is a little ludicrous. What is the metropolitan sublime? The city is built on delineations and differentiations, and its particular beauty is owed to its artifice, to its rejection of stillness, to the almost anarchic spectacle of its many relations. It is a pluralist world. It is not created for oneness or wholeness, or to strike you dumb. Instead it articulately disperses you. Sometimes the art of the city has renounced these profane fascinations for an ontological ambition—as in the late Eliot, or Rothko, or Morton Feldman—but these experiments in timelessness seem almost like protests against the subways and the streets, in the name of a more fundamental plenitude, with no parts. (Critics were quick to discern Friedrich in Rothko.) Sometimes even the most sophisticated man needs to see the sky. The urban-spiritual question is whether the soul can subsist only on the experience of other people. Is the Other—the epic hero of contemporary thought—enough? We have been trained to think so. There is a current in modern philosophy that attempts to confer upon the encounter with other persons a metaphysical dazzle, but this is a romantic mistake: the prosaic character of moral conduct, its secular sufficiency, is an important element of its universality. Materialists, too, aspire to goodness. And there is an older modern tradition that discovers transcendence in the social rapture of the city, in the delirium of the crowd—*un bain de multitude*, Baudelaire called it. "Not all men have the gift of enjoying a crowd-bath," he wrote, in which "multitude and solitude are equal." I am one of those lesser men. I detest crowds and their oceanic effects; for me, they promise only conformity and violence. But last week the disorder of the city delivered another sort of release. It was a sunny morning. The snows were finally melting, and the appearance of the toys that were buried in the deep drifts heartened me. The busyness all around me, which usually I dislike, looked to me only like a lot of life. On my way to work I stopped at a local filling station, and as I stood at the pump I was taken up contentedly with errands and obligations. I phoned a friend to talk about the battle of Marja. I reviewed the plans for Purim. I made a mental note to check on the publication date of Saul Bellow's letters. I looked at some girls. The public square was a rich and good place to be. And then I heard the tapping of a cane against an oil truck parked nearby, and then against the pump. When I turned around, I saw a hideously mutilated man. He was tall and thin, with a dancer's body, and dressed in jeans and a red sweater; but there was a crater where his nose would have been, and his upper lip was ripped and pulled and seemed to have been soldered to his cheek. The skin on his face was twisted and flattened, like a mask gone horribly wrong. And he was blind. The deformed man immediately emptied my mind. All my contentment was banished by the shock. For a few moments, he was everything I knew. I am embarrassed to say that pity gave way to fear. It was suddenly an uglier universe. The image of this devastation filled me with a sense of all possible horror. I lived with the shudder for most of the day. My last stop was the flower shop, and I bought thistles.

The metropolitan sublime: another tale, this one from P3. The lowest rung of a parking garage is a forsaken place, a prison without prisoners—the gray, dank netherworld of the urban conceit. When I drove down to the bottom of the cave on a recent afternoon, the luckless man who sits there instructed me to back my car up all the way to the far wall, past a row of cars that were parked perpendicularly to mine. I was listening to Yo-Yo Ma play the love theme from *Once Upon a Time in the West*, the greatest melody that Puccini never wrote. Maybe it was the long warm line of the music, but when I put the car into reverse and began to move smoothly backwards, something happened. All heaviness, inside and outside, disappeared. As I glided by the parked cars I watched them glide by me, as if I were standing still and they were in motion, and in the steady wafting procession—like the quietly turning pages of those wall calendars in the old movies, or the cherry blossoms loosened by the teasing breezes and floating into the Tidal Basin in early spring—in a sweet moment of indefinite suspension—I had a glimpse of the flow, an intuition of perfect evanescence. It was over quickly, but the gladness was overwhelming. I left the building in a grateful daze, and not even the important street and its important people broke the spell. In that featureless pit, a sensation of infinity! Is there really no place without grace? I do not take kindly to such uplift, but the event in the garage could not be argued away. I strolled around the block to ponder my blessing, and then proceeded to my office, and the more impure transience of my work.

All this, in a city that has never been less sublime. These are shabby days in the capital. I have always admired the White House more than the people who live in it, and the Capitol more than the people who work in it, and the Supreme Court more than the people who sit on it; and this soppy patriotic mysticism is now standing me in good stead. For there are no heroes here now. I do not subscribe to the "ungovernability" thesis, according to which the American system of government is broken because Barack Obama is having a hard time getting his way—he and his party had an opportune hour in which to seize health care reform, but they preferred to view the social emergency under the aspect of eternity and to waste our time with more demonstrations of his powerful mind and his virtuous nature; but there is almost no courage in the political class right now. Everybody is transfixed only by their numbers. They are all falling back on their respective platitudes. The instinct for self-preservation has routed all the finer instincts. There is no longer any dignity in loss: if you lose a fight for a just cause, you are merely a loser. It is an alienating spectacle; and it leaves me in the company of the Americans who "hate politicians," and pining for private experience, and preferring the worst poet to the best pundit.

Leon Wieseltier

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